

The Virtual Leader Construct: The Mass Mediatization and Simulation of Transformational Leadership

David M. Boje and Carl Rhodes, *New Mexico State University, USA and University of Technology, Sydney, Australia*

Abstract *This article explores what happens when leaders and leadership becomes virtualized through the mass media and proposes the Virtual Leader Construct (VLC) – a non-human image of a leader who is purposefully created by an organization. Using examples from the fast food industry it is proposed that there are three orders of the VLC: VLC as an imitation of a former flesh-and-blood leader; VLC as a creative re-representation of a former leader; and VLC as a fabricated leader with no direct relation to an actual person. It is argued that VLCs can and do perform potent transformation leadership functions for organizations – functions that are further enabled the more they are virtualized.*

Keywords *Baudrillard; fast food industry; mediatization; resemiotization; transformational leadership; Virtual Leadership Construct*

Introduction

Ronald McDonald, clown icon of the McDonald's Corporation, holds two 'official' executive positions. On 23 August 2003 he was appointed as McDonald's *Chief Happiness Officer* and his name was listed next to the other corporate officers in the 2003 Annual Report (McDonald's, 2004: 22). Less than a year later, on 16 April 2004, he was given the additional responsibility of *Ambassador for an Active Lifestyle*. At first glance it might seem odd that a clown be granted such positions – after all, he is not an 'actual' leader in the sense that leaders are considered exclusively to be flesh-and-blood humans. Contra such established wisdom, in this article we explore what happens when leaders and leadership becomes virtualized through the mass media.

The article develops the concept of the 'virtual leader construct'. This is a leader who is virtual, first in terms of being virtuous in relation to culturally accepted archetypes of leadership excellence, and second in terms of not being an actual embodied human being.¹ In this sense, virtuality is understood in contrast to actuality – while that which is actual can be located in the material world, that which is virtual has no

materiality. In terms of virtual leadership, this distinction is between the leader who corresponds to an actual person, and the leader who is fictional or fictionalized. Note here that we regard the virtual leader as one who can fulfill an important leadership function – in part this is because they are ‘real without being actual’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 156). This virtual leader is a ‘construct’ because she or he is an image or idea that is created by systematically fitting gestures, voice, and other virtues together to generate an impression or model. This Virtual Leadership Construct (VLC) provides a vehicle for handlers and organizers to speak intent through a simulation.

One of the most prevalent sites for the virtualization of leaders is the fast food industry. In this article we seek to theorize the VLC by examining its emergence in three major organizations from that industry. The first is the massive US-based hamburger restaurant chain Wendy’s where former chief executive Dave Thomas was recreated in an extended series of advertisements following his retirement. The second is KFC where former owner ‘Colonel’ Harland Sanders was resuscitated, in a cartoon version, as the iconic figure for the organization’s advertising. The third is McDonald’s, where Ronald McDonald holds ‘official’ corporate roles and is used explicitly to promote and communicate the organization’s vision. We start by exploring how leaders become virtual through a process of *mediatization* (Förnas, 1995; Schulz, 2004) – that is, where leadership comes to be represented in an increasingly pervasive mass media and, in so doing, becomes distanced from any actual leader. This is a process, we argue, that involves a *resemiotization* (Iedema, 2003) of leadership such that leadership’s transference to media representation has important implications for its meaning. This transfer enables a *double narration* (Bakhtin, 1984) of leadership that can (but not necessarily does) enable transformation beyond that possible by those traditionally regarded as leaders.

We analyze virtual leaders as forms of *simulacra* – copies or imitations that become realer than real (see Deleuze, 1983: 52–3). Drawing on Baudrillard’s (1983) discussion of the *orders of simulacra*, we argue that virtual leaders can exist at different levels of the virtualization, which enact different forms of substitution for traditional leadership. At these different levels, Dave Thomas’s virtual leadership is an attempt to become an imitation of himself; Colonel Sanders’s is an attempt to become a re-representation of the colonel that is increasingly distanced from the actual person; and Ronald McDonald is a leadership construct who bears no direct relation to any actual or specific leader. In each case we analyze the way that the virtualized and resemiotized leader has, or has not, helped the organization achieve the transformation leadership requirements emerging from the crisis that the fast food industry has faced in recent years – that is, the public backlash against the nutritional content of fast food and its effects of people’s health.

Mass mediatization and resemiotization

Given that we are discussing virtual leadership it should be noted that, at least to some extent, all leaders have an element of virtualization. For the vast majority of employees, CEOs and executives are only known as images on corporate videos or the subjects of stories and myths. They are not encountered face to face. What we wish to explore here, however, are much more radical forms of virtualization – those

that are encountered when leadership becomes *mass mediatised*. By this term we refer to the changes involved when leadership moves from the actual activities of leaders as embodied people, to being represented in the mass media. This focus attends to how the social and cultural importance of media, as it developed in the second half of the 20th century, has not just led to increased communication capacity, but also to new and potent relations between the media and other institutions and organizations (Förnas, 1995). As Schulz (2004) comments, mediatisation extends the natural limits of communication in terms of time and space, it provides a substitute for social activities, it weaves communication into the fabric of everyday life, and it is accommodated by economic organizations as they manage communication. This mediatisation also has an economic function in that it can produce large output at low cost, making communication accessible to more and more people. The result is that the mass media is ‘an omnipresent symbolic environment creating an essential part of the societal definitions of reality’ (p. 93).

The shift in the societal definitions of reality emerges through a process of ‘resemiotization’ (Iedema, 2003) – this resemiotization is concerned with the possible transformation of meaning as communication moves to different semiotic modalities thus ‘enabling them to create “new realities”’ (p. 42). What this means is that when a particular message or idea moves from one media to another, the change can also be expected to alter the meaning of the message or idea itself, rather than just re-present it in a different format. Here, we are concerned with changes to the meaning of leadership as it is resemiotized from the communicatory activities of the embodied actual leader to the mass media stage. In terms of leadership, we suggest that resemiotization, while communicating existing corporate intent, can also bring in new and different meanings. In this sense the leadership is ‘double narrated’ (Bakhtin, 1984) such that the formal leadership story is partially augmented and partially substituted by new meanings.

Our understanding of double narration is based on Bakhtin’s (1984) idea of ‘double voiced discourse’.² This doubling first involves corporate authors translating their intentions and values through a VLC as a form of corporate mouthpiece. Second, however, there is a possibility that the VLC might also be an active shaper of the discourse such that she or he has his or her³ own voice which always exceeds the ‘expression of the author’s ultimate authority to make meaning’ (Morson & Emerson, 1991: 149). The double narration that provides the potential for shifts in the meaning of leadership to occur exists, because, when a corporation expresses itself through a character such as a VLC, it can only do so indirectly. The corporate author is residual in the character but the character takes on a life of his or her own because she or he is different to the author (Palmieri, 1998). The result is that the character’s communication can, in principle, contain two separate meanings (Hirschop, 1998). From the point of view of double narration ‘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: 294).⁴

Although a VLC’s communication is designed to transmit the corporation’s message, the possible meanings of that communication are not necessarily restricted to that message, and, more to the point, they are not limited to what an actual human leader might be able to communicate. As we shall explore, this is most evident in the

case of Ronald McDonald. As the most extreme example of virtualization, he is not restricted by the legacy of an actual person. Further, given that 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: 404) who has a long-standing reputation of being able to talk back to power (Bakhtin, 1968). For Ronald this license to speak back to corporate power and to parody the corporation is limited, but it is still present and his ability to enable the corporation to question its past is important to McDonald’s transformation.

The leaders we discuss exist in the intersection of popular culture and management, an intersection which poses serious implications for the study of leadership. While it is rare to consider clowns and cartoon characters as being leaders, in this article we show how VLCs have emerged, and have been orchestrated by corporate handlers (e.g. editors, choreographers, scriptwriters). We contend that VLCs can act as powerful transformational leaders who can support a corporation in attaining its strategic goals. We also suggest that this virtualization might result in a problematic extension of corporate power from the organizational to the cultural domain.

Transformation in the fast food industry

Transformational leadership researchers (e.g. Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978; Conger, 1999; Dorfman, 1996; Dorfman & Howell, 1988; Gardner & Avolio, 1998; Rafferty & Griffin, 2004) have long suggested that leaders motivate followers by raising awareness of organizational missions and getting followers to transcend self-interest. Transformational leaders are said to ‘transform the needs, values, preferences and aspirations of followers from self interests to collective interests’ (House & Shamir, 1993: 82). Evidence for this is taken to be when leaders generate awareness of a mission and/or vision and influence followers by arousing their motivations and developing their abilities (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Transformation, it is claimed, is achieved when followers internalize the vision espoused by their leaders (Shamir et al., 1993).

A major characteristic that differentiates notions of 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 are advised to display individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, idealized influence and inspirational motivation (Bass, 1999; Yukl, 1999). Research in transformational leadership varies broadly from the study of the micro-behaviors of individual leaders to a consideration of transformation at an organizational level (Hunt & Conger, 1999). The bias, however, has been towards studying specific interactions between leaders and followers (Yukl, 1999) emphasizing interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects rather than organizational aspects of transformation (Pawar & Eastman, 1997). It is at the organizational level, we suggest, that VLCs both imitate and extend the possibilities of transformational leadership. 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, 1999: 39). At this organizational level, it is the idealized

influence and inspirational leadership functions of transformational leadership that are thought to be central to organizational change. This involves envisioning of a desirable future, articulating how it can be reached, setting an example for followers, and showing determination and confidence.

The focus on transformational leadership bears a clear connection to the cultural saliency and privileging of heroic narratives (Jeffcut, 1993). The idea is that a particular leader can singlehandedly enact corporate transformation leading to success and the achievement of vision (see Gronn, 2002). What we need to realize, however, is that it is the cultural saturation of such narratives that provides them with their potency. It is in this way that corporate leadership is caught up in wider societal understandings (Berry and Cartwright, 2000) through the heroic narration of transformational leadership in a 'strong plot' (Czarniawska and Rhodes, forthcoming) which organizations and their managers draw on in order to imitate the cultural expectations of leaders, especially during times of change. This is not to say that transformational leaders create organizational change out of a singular agency, but rather there is an accepted expectation that leadership will take on a heroic form of emplotment. It is through transformational leadership that such expectations can be met. It has been argued that transformational leadership is a retreat to a 'discredited heroics' and that leadership should be considered as distributed rather than having the individual as its unit of analysis (Gronn, 2002). As we will argue, however, under some circumstances the mediatized leader is able to retain a heroic persona without being tied to an actual individual leader. It is here that the relation between culture and leadership is manifest.

If organizational level transformational leadership is about leading organizational change in shifting environmental conditions, then the fast food industry is clearly a site where such a heroic leadership narrative fits. This is an industry whose history is selling food that, despite being quick, easy and inexpensive, is also high in calories, sugars and fat. Recently, growing levels of obesity in children and adults, fear of heart disease and a cultural shift towards healthy lifestyles have posed serious concerns about the social and individual effects of fast food. There have been a raft of obesity lawsuits, and growing consumer consciousness of the ill effects of fast food diets. The fast food industry has been hit hard by this shift in customer tastes for less fatty, lower-carbohydrate diets. Consumers are trying to cut back on fried food and are being encouraged to do so by both health experts and governments. This has had serious implications in the industry. For example, in 2002, McDonald's reported its first financial loss in its 47 years of operations and there had been a steady fall in its stock price until 2003. Through most of 2003, the majority of the 5500 US KFC outlets reported negative sales growth.

In a business context where change and transformation is beckoning, fast food companies have realized that they have to modify their menus in response to consumer tastes and more general concerns over health issues in society. They are also realizing that they need to reorient their strategies and images to be more consonant with healthy lifestyles. Our concern in this article is how virtual leaders contribute to the transformation that these challenges pose for organizations in the fast food industry. However, before discussing that directly, we first examine more generally the different levels of virtualization at which a leader can be constructed.

The orders of the VLC

In his book *Simulations*, Jean Baudrillard (1983) discusses what he calls the three orders of simulacra. Baudrillard's concern is with the different 'symbolic orders' that have emerged in different stages of history. Here the 'symbolic order' refers to the dominant way that the relationships between representations or signs and reality are understood. This leads Baudrillard to conclude that 'the domination of the sign within contemporary society has led . . . to a situation whereby the idea that reality can in some way be grounded in terms of the authenticity of the material object can no longer hold' (Hancock, 1999: 166). As Baudrillard discusses, there are three different orders that have successively developed since the end of feudalism in Europe.

Baudrillard (1983) argues that with the Renaissance and the growth of the bourgeoisie as a new class in Europe, the relationship between signs and reality began to radically alter. This period saw the emergence of the first order of simulacra. This is an order of the *counterfeit* where representations of objects are understood as imitations. In this case there is a clear demarcation between a representation and an original. Using examples of art works and architecture, Baudrillard shows that the counterfeit is separate from the original – it is an *imitation*. These simulacra are still grounded in an assumption that there is something actual which is being copied.

With the industrial era, Baudrillard claims that the dominant symbolic order changed. This second order of simulacra is that of *production*. Here, new mass-production technologies enabled representations to go beyond being just imitations or counterfeits. Instead, the emergence of mass production, for the first time, meant that objects could be endlessly reproduced as copies of each other without needing to be related to any notion of an original. In this second order, the difference between the original and that which is represented is significantly widened because the mass-produced item is only ever a reproduction of an image of itself. It has no original.

Baudrillard associates the contemporary era with the third order of simulacra. Here, the rapid expansion of digital technology has meant that there is no longer any discernable difference between representations and originals. The movement Baudrillard proposes is one that takes us from authenticity and presence to the domination of simulacra – copies without originals that replace an actual reality with a simulated *hyperreality*.

Baudrillard's epochalization of simulation from the Renaissance to the industrial revolution to today has been described as his most imaginative and provocative claim, as well as his least defensible one (Karreman, 2001). In what Kellner (1989) refers to as 'semiological determinism', Baudrillard suggests that the development of the social order is determined by relations of signification and symbolic exchange. Despite such criticisms, in this article we take up Baudrillard's framework in the way that it 'presupposes the potential co-existence of different orders of simulacra' rather than seeing them as 'belonging to successive phases of history' (Karreman, 2001: 104; see also Deetz, 1994). In attempting to understand and theorize virtuality, it is therefore viable to retain the framework provided in Baudrillard's orders of simulacra, while letting go of his insistence on their epochal associations. Doing so leaves a theorization of three increasing levels of virtuality. These being first-order simulacra where simulation is recognizable as a representation, second-order simulacra where the boundary between originality and representation is blurred, and

third-order simulacra where the model has no relation with a discernable original (Lane, 2000).

We use these three orders to explore the different extent to which leaders can be virtualized in the mass media and the effects of this in terms of the resemiotization of leadership. We use the examples of Wendy's, KFC and McDonald's to exemplify three orders of VLC. The first order is where the VLC is an imitation of an actual human leader – this is the order that Wendy's has experimented with. The second order is where the VLC is a mass-produced image that aberates the representation of an actual human leader – this is the order seen in KFC's Colonel Sanders. The third order is where the VLC operates as a leader, but bears no relation whatsoever to a human leader – this is the order of Ronald McDonald. As well as using the fast food industry to explore how the three orders of VLC work in relation to transformational leadership, we also suggest that each successive order has the potential to develop an increasingly potent (and problematic) form of VLC. This arises because the more virtualized the leader, the more malleable his or her character, the greater capacity she or he has for double narration.

First-order VLC – Wendy's Dave Thomas

In 1989 Dave Thomas, the founder of the Wendy's hamburger restaurant chain, began appearing in Wendy's television commercials. Between 1989 and his death in 2002, he appeared in all of the company's commercials. He was even listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records* for the longest-running advertising campaign featuring the founder of a company. This was an unprecedented mass mediatization of a corporate leader.

Before becoming the star of Wendy's TV commercials, Dave Thomas was better known as the founder of Wendy's Old Fashioned Hamburgers – a company that he founded on 15 November 1969. As the head of Wendy's, Thomas led its franchising in the early 1970s, took it public in 1976 (with 500 locations), and later transformed it into Wendy's International Inc. As of September 2004, Wendy's had 5854 outlets in the Unites States and 718 elsewhere in the world. It also owns Tim Hortons with 2632 outlets and Baja Fresh Mexican Grill with 305 outlets (Finan, 2005).

After ceasing his day-to-day management role in 1982, Thomas took up the position of chairman. In was in 1989, however, that he started an even more dramatic role as Wendy's spokesperson in their comical, sometimes whacky ('aw-shucks') TV commercials.⁵ These commercials presented Thomas not as a suited corporate leader, but as a 'regular guy'. Dressed in a short-sleeved white shirt and a red tie, the commercials would find Thomas in very unlikely situations such as driving a racing car while the actual driver ate a burger. Thomas's transition from business man to the star of television commercials marked a significant shift in his leadership function. Indeed, while corporate leaders are seldom very well known to the public, 'wearing a Wendy's apron, Thomas was one of the nation's most recognized television spokesmen' (CNN Money, 2002).

Thomas's transition from CEO to celebrity status television spokesperson is indicative of a transition toward the first order of the VLC. Through the commercials, Thomas became an image of his former self and, importantly, this was an image of

leadership divorced from his corporate role as a manager and executive. The TV Thomas was an imitation or counterfeit of his alter ego as a corporate leader. As Baudrillard (1983) remarks, the counterfeit marks a place where theatre takes over social life. It is in this way that Thomas's commercials became theatrical – he was playing the role of himself as a regular guy, rather than as an extremely successful and wealthy entrepreneur. As a symbol for Wendy's he was still very much 'tied somehow to the world' (Baudrillard, 1983: 85) but he was not tied completely to his alter ego corporate self. There is an alteration between the mass-media Thomas and the boardroom Thomas, but the difference between them does not disturb the fact that they are one and the same actual person.

In his new role and with his new media fame, Thomas's leadership capacity changed. As he was beginning to be virtualized he took on more of a mythical role in establishing Wendy's as an organization guided by old-fashioned values and common sense business practice. Indeed Wendy's is attempting to lionize Thomas's VLC in the image of a folk hero claiming that:

The long running Dave Thomas[®] campaign made Dave one of the nation's most recognizable spokesmen. North Americans loved him for his down-to-earth, homey style. As interest in Dave grew, he was often asked to talk to students, business or the media about free enterprise, success and community services.⁶

Even after Thomas's death Wendy's continues to draw on his character in its public image. His picture appears on the main page of Wendy's website⁷ with the caption: 'father, founder, friend'. In Wendy's stores too, there are posters featuring Thomas's face. The current advertisement campaign has the by-line: 'prepared Dave's way'.

In relation to transformational leadership, Wendy's used Thomas's VLC to establish a particular image for the corporation and to promulgate its corporate values. In terms of our opening question of what happens when a corporate leader becomes virtualized, for Wendy's the answer was that the VLC was able to create a corporate image that supported its ongoing success. Even to this day the organization uses Thomas as a bedrock of its way of doing business. As Wendy's current chairman and CEO Jack Schuessler recently said: 'quality is a way of doing business that must extend . . . throughout the entire enterprise. Dave Thomas declared that years ago when he declared the words "Quality is our Recipe"' (cited in Finan, 2005: 4). In terms of transformational leadership, Thomas's VLC focused on setting an example to others through his down to earth style (Bass, 1999) as well as propagating a set of organizational values (House & Shamir, 1993). These are functions that still live on after his death, and are enabled in part because of how his saturated media persona became so well known. Indeed, Thomas's own values are still used by the organization: 'quality is our recipe', 'do the right thing', 'treat people with respect', 'profit is a not a dirty word', and 'give something back'. The first of these values is registered by Wendy's as a trademark and is used as a marketing slogan.

While the virtualized Thomas retained a leadership function, his VLC capacity was never fully realized in terms of contributing to the leadership of organizational level transformation. This is because the 'nice guy' VLC Thomas, while providing the corporation with a vehicle to narrate its values and image, did not fully realize a capacity for double narration. The VLC Thomas was still very much rooted in the

epic story of the corporation and did not provide any substantial new narratives. For example, Wendy's have not used the Thomas VLC in direct relation to the health crisis facing the fast food industry. In part this may be because while Thomas had become his own theatric VLC, this image was not further transitioned or developed after Thomas died in 2002. Wendy's response to the fast food industry's health-consciousness crisis happened after that. This challenge has, however, been given specific attention by Wendy's. Seven press releases were listed on Wendy's website in 2004 – every single one of them was about an initiative the organization had taken in relation to the nutritional value of its food – from salads, to baked potatoes, to low-carbohydrate burgers.

Wendy's has become involved in a range of activities to help generate a more health conscious image. In August 2004 Wendy's partnered with the American Dietetic Association in a nutrition education program. The plan was to develop tools and materials to help customers understand the nutritional contents of the various items on Wendy's menu. In December of the same year the 'Combo Choices' menu was introduced allowing customers to substitute part of the standard meal for healthier options such as replacing french fries with a baked potato or a salad. In the kid's meal, low-fat milk can be substituted for the normal soft drink. In January 2005 fresh fruit was put on the menu

In terms of VLC, what we find with Wendy's is an attempt to approach the first order of VLC through the mass mediatization of Thomas. By making him a household name as a regular guy, Wendy's were able create an image of corporate leadership distanced from the goings on in the board room and the stock market, and instead to have a leader who could promote the traditional values that it aspired to. The result is that Thomas is still a VLC, but in a fairly minimal way, and without being used directly in relation to the changes going on in the industry.

Second-order VLC – KFC's Colonel Sanders

While Dave Thomas approached being a first order for VLC at Wendy's, it is Colonel Sanders, the iconic image of KFC, who takes this leadership in the direction of the second order. The development of the Colonel's virtualization, however, does pass through the first order, as we shall see. The story of KFC starts in 1952 when the original Harland Sanders (born on 9 September 1890), who was at the time living on his social security cheque, decided to devote his life to opening a chicken franchising business that he called Kentucky Fried Chicken. Sanders had for a long time been a cook – indeed, his title of Colonel was not earned through military service but was given to him in 1935 by the then Governor of Kentucky Ruby Laffoon for his contribution to Kentucky cuisine. By 1964, when Sanders sold the business to investors for US\$2 million, Kentucky Fried Chicken had 600 outlets. In 1969 the company went public with Sanders being the first shareholder. Today KFC has more than 11,000 restaurants in more than 80 countries and territories. It is also part of Yum! Brands Inc., the world's largest restaurant system with more than 32,500 KFC, A&W All-American Food(tm), Taco Bell, Long John Silver's and Pizza Hut restaurants.⁸

Although officially ending his ownership of Kentucky Fried Chicken more than 30 years ago, Colonel Sanders has still been very much a part of the corporation. He

quickly came out of retirement to be paid an annual salary as a corporate spokesperson. This was a move which saw him being increasingly mediatized through his new role as a pitchman in television commercials. For example, in one commercial the Colonel was kidnapped by a 'housewife' and interrogated in an abandoned warehouse; but he still refused to give up his famous eleven herbs and spices secret recipe. Sanders also had a candid, individualistic style, and a theatrical presence. Together this made him a frequent TV talk show guest. He continued to travel 250,000 miles a year and do TV ads until his death in 1980. Up until this point, Sanders, like Thomas at Wendy's, had only started to become a first order VLC. He represented the corporation's espoused values through his being mass mediatized as a heroic leader with a unique and virtuous character. While Thomas was the regular guy, Sanders was the eccentric southern gentleman replete with white suit, red shoe lace tie and exaggerated white beard. He gave the organization an aura of authenticity with his 'secret' herbs and spices and his living out of the American dream through his epic rags-to-riches story. Even today, his photograph appears on the main page of KFC's website with the banner: 'the Colonel Welcomes You to KFC'.⁹ His stylized image also graces the containers in which the food is served.

For the ten years after his death the image of Colonel Sanders only played a minor role at Kentucky Fried Chicken. His picture still appeared in the stores, and there was still the secret recipe, but there was no more mass media coverage through advertisements and television appearances. In 1990, however, things changed as the older campaign was revived with Sanders look-alikes. Still operating as a first-order VLC, the new theatric VLC was an imitation of Sanders's imitation of himself. It did not prove successful. Things changed, however, when on 9 September 1993 an animated version of Sanders was released. It was also in this period that the company changed its branding from Kentucky Fried Chicken to KFC, thus removing the word 'fried'. The new Sanders was even more virtualized to meet the requirements of the new brand strategy. He was a cartoon colonel replete with his familiar string tie, goatee, white suit and cane. Actor Randy Quaid provided the voice.

What KFC did was to restylize a deceased corporate founder's first-order VLC, by contemporizing his virtual essence for a new generation of consumers, systematically orchestrated in an animated Colonel. The resemiotized leader, however, became increasingly distanced from the actual person that it was representing. In Baudrillard's (1983) terms his second-order simulacrum liquidated the reality of the first order and absorbed its appearance. In this order, rather than an imitative theatre there is a repetitive production whereby the simulacra became increasingly distanced from the actual originals so as to become copies of themselves – as in the case of mass production. In terms of VLC, however, the animated Colonel failed to take on leadership qualities, rendering him instead more of foolish cartoon.¹⁰ He was narrated as both the founder of the organization and as a cartoon character, but the second narration lacked any form of leadership. While the first-order VLC colonel performed a leadership function in terms of embodying the corporation's values, the animated Colonel moved toward the second order of simulacrum, but lost his leadership edge. Gone was the individualized style and the personal embodiment of virtues – the new colonel continued to fulfill a marketing function, but not a leadership one. This colonel was mass mediatized and virtualized but, in the process, his leadership capacity was significantly diminished.

Like most fast food restaurants, in recent years KFC has faced an increasing number of problems associated with its high-fat products – when Kentucky Fried Chicken changed its name to KFC, the frying did not stop. KFC still offers its ‘original recipe’ chicken, more than 60 per cent of the energy value of which can come from fat. There are now also salads and lower-fat sandwiches on the menu. There are also the familiar partnerships with sports celebrities – in KFC’s case golfer Annika Sorenstam, baseballer Barry Bonds and American football players Jim McMahon and William ‘The Refrigerator’ Perry. Despite this, KFC continues to face problems in relation to the dietary value and production processes of its food. In November 2003 KFC retracted advertisements which claimed that eating KFC was healthy. The advertisement in question stated that a skinless chicken breast has only 3 grams of fat. Complaints to the Fair Trading Commission in the United States claimed that most KFC consumers do not eat skinless and un-battered chicken, and the advertisements were therefore deceptive. To make matters worse, in 2003 Pamela Anderson (former Baywatch star), dressed in lettuce leaf-bikini in billboard ads,¹¹ joined the boycott of KFC by the ‘People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals’ (PETA).¹²

Despite the corporation’s continued use of the Colonels’ image to establish a sense of authenticity, his ‘leadership’ has been able to do little to respond to the current health crisis. His re-narration into the animated Colonel no longer represents the founder’s leadership virtues, so while he is virtualized in the second order, the term VLC ceases to apply. In relation to our opening question of what happens when a leader is virtualized, in the case of Colonel Sanders the increasing levels of virtualization meant that his simulacrum was less and less able to provide a leadership function.

Third-order VLC – McDonald’s Ronald McDonald

With Dave Thomas we saw a movement toward a first-order VLC. In Colonel Sanders we saw the unrealized potential for a second-order VLC. It is in Ronald McDonald, however, that we see the most successful VLC and the one who is the most virtualized.¹³ Ronald has appeared in many incarnations since his humble beginnings as an entertainer at a Washington DC franchise of McDonald’s in the early 1960s. Today American children rank him as second only to Santa Claus as the most recognizable person (Royle, 2000) thanks to the massive media coverage of his character in television advertisements, live shows, merchandising and videos.

Ronald’s leadership capacity is clearly demonstrated in the series of events following the death of CEO Jim Cantalupo on 19 April 2004. Ironically, Cantalupo (a cheeseburger and fries lover), died of heart failure just when he was to celebrate McDonald’s most highly successful corporate reorientation: to become a nutritious and fitness-conscious chain. As CEO, Cantalupo was tasked with turning around a corporation that had just had 14 consecutive months of same store sales decline, a stock price that was at the lowest point in nearly a decade, and a downgrading of its credit rating by Standard and Poor. In less than 16 months as CEO, Cantalupo’s campaign introduced salads and other nutritional food sources, slowed franchise proliferation, and refocused McDonald’s toward a ‘back to basics’ approach of customer service. The result was increased same store sales, and reversal of the

sagging stock price (stock rose 70.8 per cent during Cantalupo's tenure as CEO, from US\$16.08 in December 2002 to US\$27.46 in April 2004).

By 6 am on the day of Cantalupo's death, the Board convened (in teleconference, but with several members attending in person) to implement its formal succession plan. By 7 am Charlie Bell was the new CEO.¹⁴ Bell's story, as it was publicized by McDonald's, told of a rags-to-riches American dream (even though he was Australian) that saw him start his career as a 15-year-old fry clerk who made the climb to CEO. This was a reversal of the *McJob* image of dead end, no skill work in fast food outlets.¹⁵

Immediately following Bell's appointment, Ronald took on yet another leadership task. The Board commissioned full-page advertisements of Ronald commemorating Cantalupo. The advertisements presented a photo of Ronald in human clown form, with a tear running down his right cheek. As the tear made his clown makeup run, there was a caption that read: 'we miss you Jim'.¹⁶ The advertisement, distributed just two days after Cantalupo's death, appeared in eight major news outlets, including the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times* and *USA Today*. Translated versions were placed in major dailies around the world. What is most interesting about the tear advertisement is that it was Ronald, not Charlie Bell (the new CEO) or a Board member, who gave emotional expression to corporate grief. As we will explore, this is an indicative demonstration that Ronald has achieved the status of a third-order VLC. In the 'Ronald's tear' example, Ronald had the charismatic influence to appeal to people around the world, and to meet the strategic goal of sustaining corporate image cohesion in a time of crisis.

Ronald, more than the other VLCs in the fast food industry, plays a special role in corporate transformation. In terms of the challenges of changing consumer preferences and public opinion about fast food, McDonald's has been particularly singled out. The extensive publicity surrounding the 2004 movie *Supersize Me* is a salient example of this. The movie is a documentary that follows director and star Morgan Spurlock as he ate nothing but McDonald's food for 30 days. As a result he gained 28.5 pounds in weight, became impotent and was warned by doctors that his endeavor was a serious health risk. McDonald's has also faced a variety of lawsuits about its alleged contribution to obesity (Bradford, 2003). With McDonald's being the largest fast food franchise with over 30,000 outlets in 121 nations, the industry leader was taking the most heat.

The use of Ronald in the tear advertisements is an important illustration of his leadership, but his real transformation role is his leadership of McDonald's attempt to transform into a champion for nutrition and fitness. Ronald, as he is incarnated by more than 250 actors who play him around the world in his new live show (*Get Moving with Ronald*), and animation-Ronald appearing in commercials and on tray liners, is doing what actual transformational leaders do: he is influencing people to ensure the organization achieves its strategic corporate objectives (Kapica, 2004). His leadership involves espousing the company's vision (Shamir et al., 1993), influencing outsiders to have a favorable impression of the corporation (Yukl, 1999), showing determination and confidence, setting an example (Bass, 1999), and communicating enthusiasm and inspiration (Rafferty & Griffin, 2004). In so doing, however, he has realized a double narration whereby he continues to present the older image of McDonald's as a fast food restaurant, but has also created a new image that is highly questioning of the company's fast food legacy.

Ronald's malleable character has been exploited to enable him to better meet McDonald's leadership challenges. Indeed, by him being such a character, McDonald's has achieved a resemiotization that has significantly altered the meanings and effects of its leadership. In a series of six films featuring Ronald released between 1998 and 2002, Ronald's character was significantly modified from the persona of a clown entertainer to that of super-hero clown who transmuted one material into another, changed the weather with a breath, and commanded animals with a thought. This new Ronald was adventurous and heroic, displaying the transformational leadership characteristics of creativity, risk taking and experimentation (Bass, 1999). Further, unlike Dave Thomas and Colonels Sanders, the executives were keen to ensure that Ronald did not appear too much of a salesman, but rather wanted him to be edgy, timely, and more in step with popular culture (Kramer, 1999). In the final three films Ronald's character also symbolically represents the corporation's desired image of fitness and health. The actor who plays the new Ronald is thinner, more athletic, and more active – he even uses a treadmill. Resemiotized in the mass media, the VLC Ronald communicates the organization's vision in his very being.

While KFC and Wendy's virtualized former owners in comedic, even clown-like ways, with Ronald, McDonald's has gone the full way toward a third-order VLC. Ronald approaches being a hyper-real leader in that he is generated by a model of a 'real without origin' (Baudrillard, 1983: 2). What this means is that while the first two orders of VLC retain the epic narrative associated with a single leader, with Ronald 'the system puts an end to the myth of its origin and to all the referential values it has itself secreted along the way' (p. 113) such that 'the contradiction between the real and the imaginary is effaced' (p. 142). He even cries human tears. In Baudrillard's terms, Ronald's leadership approaches an aesthetic hallucination of reality (p. 148). What this means for the corporation is that Ronald can perform a much greater variety of leadership functions because he is no longer constrained by the limitations of an actual person – while he in part imitates and extends the function of transformational leadership, he does not need to imitate any actual person, and as a result his capacity for double narration is advanced. Corporate power never had it so good.

Like Wendy's and KFC, however, McDonald's did have a heroic leader who founded and grew the organization – this was Ray Kroc who retired from McDonald's in 1969 and passed away in 1984. Like the other two organizations, McDonald's did experiment with using Kroc in first- and third-order simulacra. As a corporate leader Kroc became a lionized, larger-than-life, epic character who was promoted through his autobiography and other books written about him (see Kroc & Anderson, 1976; Love, 1986/1995). As reported in an authorized biography (Westman & Molina, 1980) he was even used as the inspiration for the animated character 'Mayor of McDonaldland'. These uses of Kroc do indicate a level of virtualization. Further, if work by Boas and Chain (1976), Schlosser (2001), and Kincheloe (2002) is any indication, there is a discernable gap between Kroc's epic heroic construct and the actual person called Kroc. The original Kroc was not the grandfatherly, nice guy he was double narrated to be. Instead he was an aggressive, hard-hitting strategist, who plotted expansion in what he called the 'war room'.

McDonald's had at least two potential VLCs, Ronald and Kroc, but, different to Wendy's and KFC, it was the fictional Ronald who was fully developed by the corporation. The reason for this, we suggest, is that when Kroc's epic narrative had ceased to be useful to the corporation, a fictional and more virtualized, yet still heroic, leader was better suited to its needs. What made McDonald's famous was its Taylorized, standardized, routinized and efficiency-focused work practices – practices that were replicated irrespective of cultural or geographic location (see Ritzer, 1993/2002). It was only after Kroc's death in 1984 that the restaurant was able to bring in regional menu variations to address localized tastes. The predictability that made McDonald's successful in the first instance had to be modified. In fact, going global, and keeping up with consumer changes in diet, made staying the same (what made McDonald's great) a liability. People began to see standardized uniformity as boring, insipid and too controlling.¹⁷ The aggressive expansion policies and hardball, 'war room' tactics of Kroc (Boas & Chain, 1976) continued, long after his death, until the corporation took a spiraling downturn in the late 1990s. It was precisely then that the new Ronald, replete with his fitness programs and updated image, began to appear. The third-order VLC worked hand in hand with the corporation to lead it out of financial problems and to be renarrated as a more health-conscious, fitness-friendly corporation.

The orders of VLC and the potential for transformation

The likes of Ronald, Colonel Sanders and Dave Thomas are not who leadership research traditionally defines as transformational leaders. As we have tried to illustrate, however, once virtualized and resemiotized in the mass media, leaders can still perform leadership functions. In part VLCs are substitutes for traditional leadership (Howell, 1997; Howell & Dorfman, 1981; Jermier & Kerr, 1997; Kerr & Jermier, 1978). This substitution can operate at a transactional level where the VLC is a spokescharacter or an iconic symbol for selling fast food. It can also operate at a transformational level where the VLC is stylized and orchestrated to mimic leadership virtues as well as to provide the organization with a means to narrate a new identity. While in part this suggests that leadership might be collapsing into media and marketing, it also suggests that the creation of successful brand icons itself is not tantamount to the creation of VLCs. Indeed, as we have explored, the leadership potential of the VLC varies qualitatively in relation to the character of the icon itself. Hence while marketing is a necessary condition for the virtualization of leadership it is not a sufficient one. Leadership narratives and resemiotization are also necessary.

In the discussion above, we have explored how leaders can become virtualized at three different levels. A first-order VLC which is an imitation of an actual human leader, a second-order VLC which is a re-representation and mutation of an actual human leader, and a third-order VLC who operates independently of any relation with an actual human leader. As we observed as the level of virtualization increases, the distinction between the human leader and the virtual leader becomes more and more blurred. Dave Thomas's television counterfeit is still recognizably a copy of him. Colonel Sanders's, as he has been modified throughout the years, continues to slip away from his referentiality to the original founder of the organization. In Ronald's case, his leadership requires no person for him to be imitating – he is just Ronald.

Our argument is that, while all three orders of VLC can perform leadership functions, it is at the third level – that of the hyperreal simulacrum – that transformational leadership is most potent. In the first order of VLC virtual leaders, such as Kroc, Thomas, and the Colonel can be used to depict an epic story of leadership. They become lionized and exaggerated as heroes symbolizing an historical era and a construct out of which deviation by succeeding CEOs is unimaginable. Kroc (Kroc and Anderson, 1976) and Thomas's (1991) autobiographies and the Colonel's biography (Pearce, 1982) were written after each had retired as CEO and all played a part in romanticizing an epic past by presenting a rags-to-riches storyline.

If transformational leadership at an organizational level involves rethinking and reorienting significant aspects of an organization's image, values and practices, then the virtualization of an entrenched epic leader might well become a hindrance. This is the case because the legendary status of the founder will always be backward looking and nostalgic. This explains why Thomas's first-order VLC was used to maintain an image of traditional American values for the corporation, but was not used to directly respond to the fast food nutrition crisis. It also explains why, when the Colonel made the transition to a second level of virtualization, his leadership capacities were diminished: he could not portray a new KFC because, although distanced from it, he was still associated with the original Colonel and his epic heritage. In the case of Ronald McDonald, however, we find that at in the third order of VLC his full transformational leadership was realized. As a *hyper-real* VLC Ronald is not limited by the actuality of any leader before him, and is therefore able to metamorphasize into the type of character that can perform the leadership function the organization deems that it requires. While KFC and Wendy's have introduced new healthy menu items and modified their marketing around health consciousness, through Ronald, McDonald's is rewriting itself as an organization that takes a leading role in the promotion of healthy, balanced lifestyles – this is more than just a menu change, it is a concerted effort toward transformation at the core of the organization.

In the fast food industry, the transformational leadership potential of the VLCs is resulting in two potential 'stylistic lines of transformation' (Bakhtin, 1981). The first line of stylistic transformation is from an epic VLC narrative to one that is more novelistic. 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 actual 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: 239). The double-voiced autonomy of the VLC can disrupt the older epic.

An epic corporation is linked to a narrative that positions the organization as being the creation of a heroic leader who singlehandedly leads and defines it. A novelistic corporation is defined by the dialogic juxtaposition of diverse voices, styles and contrary points of view. As we have seen, after their retirements Ray Kroc, Dave Thomas, and the Colonel became epic, larger-than-life caricatures of their actual

selves, and their leadership virtues grew even more legendary after they died. By being mediatized, this epic narrative was communicated to a much broader audience, but its resemiotization did not radically alter its meaning. The VLC was not sufficiently developed to fully overcome the epic. Conversely, at McDonald's, Ronald's VLC supplanted that of Kroc as a new and different type of hero, and, in turn enabled a move away from the established epic and a reimagining of the meaning of the organization. Ronald allowed McDonald's to publicly question its epic past, and in so doing to present a new future – he enabled a second narrative to emerge.

The second line of stylistic transformation is the reaccentuation of a corporation's VLC from one idea system to another. In the fast food industry the requirement was a move from an image of unhealthy food to one of fitness and nutrition. Each of the three organizations we reviewed have responded to this challenge, but it was only in McDonald's, with its more advanced VLC, that virtual leadership was able to significantly enhance the reaccentuation. 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 even 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. Through his revised virtual character, his resemiotization, and his media saturation, Ronald himself has tried to epitomize healthy lifestyles, and in so doing tried to facilitate a sympathetic transformation of the same kind in the corporation itself.

Conclusion

What we have proposed in this article is that the VLC is a new way that corporations are beginning to lead and influence people in the global era, where mediatized images are almost more real than their 'real' counterparts. The VLC begins with the theatrical production of leaders, either as animated or imitative live characters, and extends to VLCs who do not originate from actual leaders at all. As the global socioeconomic context of the corporation changes, such as in the example of pressures on the fast food industry to provide more nutritious and healthy food, VLCs can be modified to convey the right signals for employees and consumers, as with Ronald McDonald.¹⁸ Furthermore, they can begin to 'speak for themselves' as a means of counteracting dominant organizational discourse.

For corporations VLCs help to resolve the issue of how leaders in a global economy can become omnipresent: one leader cannot be everywhere, but a mediatized VLC can. On a minimal level as a recognized leader retires or passes away, the VLC can become a simulated embodiment of established leadership virtues. More maximally, the VLC can resemiotize leadership so as to invent virtues and images of leadership that did not inhere in retired or deceased leaders. When handlers orchestrate and organize a VLC, what gets generated can become copied, recopied, and restylized until it emerges as a story that becomes autonomous from its foundations – a VLC fit for a hyper-real world. The science fiction dream is that with advances in media technology, the virtual becomes an increasingly important part of the real. It is still too early to conclude what such an extension of reality might mean

for leadership. However, as the fast food examples demonstrated, when leadership heads in this direction it begins to function through different means. No longer the sole domain of the actual human being, leadership can and is taking on new virtualized forms.

As we have been arguing, the arrival of the VLCs marks a shift in the potential power of corporate leadership. This shift entails a movement away from power as it might be channeled through individual persons and moves toward a radical recentering of leadership power to the VLC. In the case of McDonald's this might be seen, at one extreme, as a form of positive power in that it has enabled broader social and cultural concerns about the health value of fast food to directly influence the conduct of the organization. In this sense virtual leadership can be seen to pressure corporations to imitate what is socially expected from them. Conversely, another extreme would suggest that VLCs are a means for corporations to indirectly and surreptitiously enhance their power while reducing transparency. Although McDonald's has done the most, each of the organizations discussed in this article have changed their images and their menus to add healthier food items. Despite this, they still offer the same unhealthy items and justify the effects of this through a liberal philosophy of providing 'free' choice.

It is our argument that the VLC is located between these two extremes of being culturally influenced and being conspiratorially produced. Further, this in-betweenness is a result of the double narration of the VLC. Clearly organizations such as the ones discussed here will create brand icons as a means of enhancing their control over their organizations and their market positions. At the same time, the double narration suggests that VLC behavior is not fully determined by corporate desire. The important point is that given the social saturation of organizations and the ongoing corporate focus on marketing, VLCs may well become increasingly important facets of leadership. It is the operation of this leadership and how it is located between narrowly defined corporate agendas and the broader needs of society that will influence the organizational and social landscape to come.

Notes

1. Etymologically, *virtue* and *virtual* both originate in the Latin word *virtus* which refers to strength, courageousness, and excellence. This clearly relates to the modern sense of *virtue* as meaning admirable moral qualities. It also relates to the modern *virtual*, i.e. that which, although not actual, still contains the essential characteristics and virtues of the actual.
2. In drawing on Bakhtin we are explicitly placing our analysis within a narrative tradition. While narrative has been used extensively in the study of organizations (see Boje, 2001), we are using Bakhtin in particular because it is his idea of double-voiced discourse in narrative that is central to understanding the operation of the VLC. Further, narrative is important here because, as a temporalized form of discourse, it specifically lends itself to an analysis of change in organizations.
3. Although we are using both male and female gender pronouns, it is worth considering that all of the examples we use in this article are male. This very much attests to the masculine stereotypes that inform leadership discourse and its epic narratives.
4. We recognize here that the non-neutrality of language has been a central theme in poststructuralist approaches to organization studies (see Westwood & Linstead, 2001).

Our point in using Bakhtin is not to suggest that this is an original insight for our article, but rather to specify the particular way in which this non-neutrality is manifest in the process of double narration.

5. Industry analysts and company officials said the advertisements helped the company rebound from a difficult period in the mid-1980s when earnings sank.
6. Quoted from the special section of the Wendy's website devoted to Dave Thomas's legacy (<http://www.wendys.com/dave/flash.html>).
7. See <http://www.wendys.com/w-1-0.shtml>
8. These data come from the KFC website: <http://www.kfc.com/about>
9. See <http://www.kfc.com>
10. For more on this point see http://www.filmtracks.com/home/mascots_thesis/kfc.html
11. CNN Money Line (21 October 2003) on-line photo and article available at: http://money.cnn.com/2003/10/17/news/companies/pamela_kfc/?cnn=yes; also see the BBC article and photo at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/merseyside/2932505.stm>
12. PETA claims that KFC suppliers drug and scald chickens, and sear off their beaks with hot blades before slaughtering them in an inhumane manner.
13. It is worth noting that McDonald's is not the only fast food chain to use a clown as an advertising icon. For example, in 1979 Burger King created a cartoon character eponymously named Burger King. This character appeared to be a parody or imitation of Ronald McDonald. He was a costumed clownish character who had a magical kingdom (patterned after 'McDonaldland' using the theme of 'King Arthur'). The 'Burger King Kingdom' characters are 'Sir Shakes-A-Lot' a milkshake character similar to McDonald's 'Grimace'; 'Duke of Doubts', a rogue stealing burgers like McDonald's 'Hamburglar'; the 'Wizard of Fries' is a robot with a French fry's head, whereas McDonaldland's 'CosMc' is a robot with an alien's head, and so forth. The project was abandoned by 1981, leaving the animated 'Burger King' all alone. The key difference, however, is that while the Burger King clowns did symbolically represent the firm, they were not imbued with leadership characteristics and did not perform any leadership function.
14. Sadly, Charlie Bell died in January of 2005 from colorectal cancer at the age of 44. Although he is credited with introducing McDonald's new healthy menu options, Guy Russo CEO of McDonald's Australia is quoted as saying: 'When people would ask [Charlie] how he was he would say, "fat and happy" and the only exercise he did was jumping to conclusions' (cited from *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 January 2005, available at: <http://www.smh.com.au/news/Business/Charlie-Bell-a-fat-and-happy-boy-from-Oz/2005/01/20/1106110860641.html?oneclick=true>).
15. The 11th edition of Merriam-Webster's *Collegiate Dictionary*, published in June 2003, defines a *McJob* as 'a low-paying job that requires little skill and provides little opportunity for advancement'. Similar definitions appear in the *Oxford*, *Random House*, and *American Heritage* dictionaries. The term *McJob* was coined by the Canadian novelist Douglas Coupland (1991) in his novel *Generation X*. Coupland defines a *McJob* as 'A low-pay, low-prestige, low-dignity, low-benefit, no-future job in the service sector. Frequently considered a satisfying career choice by people who have never held one' (p. 5).
16. The tear ad (without caption) as it ran in color version in *USA Today* on 21 April 2004 can be seen at http://www.adage.com/images/random/ronald0421_big.jpg
17. See for example, an analysis by Jacques Pepin at <http://www.time.com/time/time100/profile/kroc3.html>
18. Although the VLC is clearly a public figure, she or he can still be expected to have a direct influence in employees. Employees of fast food restaurants are also likely to be their customers, so they do experience the organization's marketing. Further, given that

the front-line staff at fast food restaurants are generally teenagers and young adults, they either are, or have recently been, the main target of much of the marketing (see Boje & Rhodes, forthcoming).

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Peter Dorfman, Renee Brown, John Howell, Michael S. Kearns, and Grace Ann Rosile for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

References

- Bakhtin, M. M. (1968) *Rabelais and his World*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981) *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1984) *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bass, B. M. (1985) *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations*. New York: The Free Press.
- Bass, B. M. (1999) 'Two Decades of Research and Development in Transformational Leadership', *European Journal of Organizational Psychology* 8: 9–32.
- Bass, B. M., & Avolio, B. J. (eds) (1994) *Improving Organizational Effectiveness through Transformational Leadership*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Baudrillard, J. (1983) *Simulation*. New York: Semiotext(e).
- Berry, A. J., & Cartwright, S. (2000) 'Leadership: A Critical Construction', *Leadership and Organizational Development Journal* 21: 343–9.
- Boas, A. M., & Chain, S. (1976) *Big Mac: The Unauthorized Story of McDonald's*. New York: E. P. Dutton.
- Boje, D. M. (2001) *Narrative Methods for Organization and Communication Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Boje, D. M. and Rhodes, C. (forthcoming) 'The leadership style of Ronald McDonald: Double Narration and Stylistic Lines of Transformation', *The Leadership Quarterly*.
- Bradford, L. (2003) 'Fat Foods: Back in Court: Novel Legal Theories Revive the Case Against McDonald's', *Time On Line Edition*, 11 August. Available at: <http://www.time.com/time/insidebiz/article/0,9171,1101030811-472858,00.html>
- Burns, J. M. (1978) *Leadership*. New York: Harper and Row.
- CNN Money (2002) 'Wendy's Founder Dead at 69', 8 January. Available at: http://money.cnn.com/2002/01/08/companies/wendys_obit/
- Conger, J. A. (1999) 'Charismatic and Transformational Leadership in Organizations: An Insider's Perspective on These Developing Streams of Research', *Leadership Quarterly* 10: 145–79.
- Coupland, D. (1991) *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Czarniawska, B., & Rhodes, C. (forthcoming) 'Strong Plots: The Relationship between Popular Culture and Management Theory and Practice', in P. Gagliardi & B. Czarniawska (eds) *Management and The Humanities*. London: Edward Elgar.
- Deetz, S. (1994) 'Representative Practices and the Political Analysis of Corporations', in B. Kovacic (ed.) *Organizational Communication: New Perspectives*, pp. 209–42. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Deleuze, G. (1983) 'Plato and the Simulacrum', *October* 27: 52–3.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1994) *What is Philosophy?* London: Verso.

- Dorfman, P. (1996) 'International and cross-cultural leadership', in B. J. Punnett & O. Shenkar (eds) *Handbook for International Management Research*, pp. 267–349. Cambridge: Blackwell.
- Dorfman, P. W., & Howell, J. P. (1988) 'Dimensions of National Culture and Effective Leadership Patterns: Hofstede Revisited', in R. N. Farmer & E. G. McGoun (eds) *Advances in International Comparative Management*, pp. 127–50. New York: JAI.
- Finan, K. (2005) 'Wendy's: The State of the Enterprise', *Wendy's Magazine*. Available at: <http://www.wendys-invest.com/main/enterprise1204.pdf>
- Förnas, J. (1995) *Cultural Theory and Late Modernity*. London: SAGE.
- Gardner, W. L., & Avolio, B. J. (1998) 'The Charismatic Relationship: A Dramaturgical Perspective', *Academy of Management Review* 23: 32–58.
- Gronn, P. (2002) 'Distributed Leadership as a Unit of Analysis', *The Leadership Quarterly* 13: 423–52.
- Hancock, P. (1999) 'Baudrillard and the Metaphysics of Motivation: A Reappraisal of Corporate Culturalism in the Light of the Work and Ideas of Jean Baudrillard', *Journal of Management Studies* 36(2): 155–75.
- Hirschop, K. (1998) 'Is Dialogism for Real?', in D. Sheperd (ed.) *The Contexts of Bakhtin*, pp. 183–96. Amsterdam: Harwood.
- Holquist, M. (1990) *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*. London: Routledge.
- House, R. J., & Shamir, B. (1993) 'Toward the Integration of Transformational, Charismatic, and Visionary Theories', in M. Chemers & R. Ayman (eds) *Leadership Theory and Research: Perspectives and Directions*, pp. 81–107. New York: Academic Press.
- Howell, J. P. (1997) 'Substitutes for Leadership: Their Meaning and Measurement – a Historical Assessment', *Leadership Quarterly* 8(2): 113–16.
- Howell, J. P., & Dorfman, P. W. (1981) 'Substitutes for Leadership: Test of a Construct', *Academy of Management Journal* 24: 714–28.
- Hunt, J. G., & Conger, J. A. (1999) 'From Where We Sit: An Assessment of Transformational and Charismatic Leadership Research', *The Leadership Quarterly* 10: 335–43.
- Iedema, R. (2003) 'Multimodality, Resemiotization: Extending the Analysis of Discourse as Multi-semiotic Practice', *Visual Communication* 2(1): 29–57.
- Jeffcut, P. (1993) 'From Interpretation to Representation in Organization Studies: Postmodernism, Ethnography and Organization Studies', *Organization Studies* 15: 241–74.
- Jermier, J. M., & Kerr, S. (1997) 'Substitutes for Leadership: Their Meaning and Measurement – Contextual Recollections and Current Observations', *The Leadership Quarterly* 8(2): 95–101.
- Kapica, C. (2004) 'The Role of Quick Serve restaurants in Wellness. Kapica is Director of McDonald's Corporation's Global Nutrition'. Slide presentation to 26th American Overseas Dietetic Association Conference, 27 March, Nicosia, Cyprus. Slides available on line at: <http://www.cydadiet.org/april2004/cathyKapica.pdf>
- Karreman, D. (2001) 'The Scripted Organization: Dramaturgy from Burke to Baudrillard', in R. Westwood & S. Linstead (eds) *The Language of Organization*, pp. 89–111. London: SAGE.
- Kellner, D. (1989) *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Kerr, S., & J. M. Jermier (1978) 'Substitutes for Leadership: Their Meaning and Measurement', *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance* 22: 395–403.
- Kincheloe, J. L. (2002) *The Sign of the Burger: McDonald's and the Culture of Power*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

- Kramer, L. (1999) 'McDonald's Execs Explore Makeover for Ronald Icon', *Advertising Age* 70(34): 14–18.
- Kroc, R., & Anderson, R. (1976) *Grinding It Out: The Making of McDonald's*. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company.
- Lane, R. J. (2000) *Jean Baudrillard*. London: Routledge.
- Love, J. F. (1986/1995) *McDonald's: Behind The Arches*. New York: Bantam Books.
- McDonald's Corporation (2004) *McDonald's 2003 Summary Annual Report*. Available at: http://www.mcdonalds.com/corp/invest/pub/annual_report.html
- Morson, G. S., & Emerson, C. (1991) *Mikhail Bakhtin*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Palmieri, G. (1998) 'The author' according to Bakhtin . . . and Bakhtin the author', in D. Sheperd (ed.) *The Contexts of Bakhtin*, pp. 45–56. Amsterdam: Harwood.
- Pawar, B. S., & Eastman, K. K. (1997) 'The Nature and Implications of Contextual Influences on Transformational Leadership', *Academy of Management Review* 22: 80–110.
- Pearce, E. (1982) *The Colonel: The Captivating Biography of the Dynamic Founder of a Fast-Food Empire*. New York: Doubleday.
- Rafferty, A. E., & Griffin, M. A. (2004) 'Dimensions of Transformational Leadership: Conceptual and Empirical Extensions', *The Leadership Quarterly* 15: 329–54.
- Ritzer, G. (1993/2002) *The McDonaldization of Society*. Newbury Park, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Royle, T. (2000) *Working for McDonald's in Europe: The Unequal Struggle*. London: Routledge.
- Schlosser, E. (2001) *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Schulz, W. (2004) 'Reconstructing Mediatization as an Analytic Concept', *European Journal of Communication* 19(1): 87–101.
- Shamir, B., House, R. J., & Arthur, M. B. (1993) 'The Motivational Effects of Charismatic Leadership: A Self-concept Based Theory', *Organizational Science* 4: 577–94.
- Thomas, D. R. (1991) *Dave's Way: A New Approach to Old Fashioned Success*. New York: J. P. Putnam's Sons.
- Westman, P., & Molina, M. (1980) *Ray Kroc, Mayor of McDonaldland*. Minneapolis, MN: Dillon Press.
- Westwood, R., & Linstead, S. (eds) (2001) *Language and Organization*. London: SAGE.
- Yukl, G. (1999) 'An Evaluative Essay on Current Conceptions of Effective Leadership', *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology* 8: 33–48.

David M. Boje is Professor of Management and the Arthur Owens Chair in Business Administration in the Management Department at New Mexico State University, USA. He has published numerous articles in journals such as *Management Communication Quarterly*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, and *Academy of Management Journal*. He is past division-chair of the Research Methods Division of the Academy of Management and incoming President of the Board of Governors of the International Academy of Business Disciplines.

Carl Rhodes is Associate Professor of Organization Studies in the School of Management at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), Australia. His research interests relate to the subjective and cultural meaning of work, management and organization. Current projects focus on the ethics of managerial work and the

representation of work and organizations in popular culture. He is the author of *Writing Organization: (Re)presentation and Control in Narratives at Work* (Benjamins, 2001), co-author of *Reconstructing the Lifelong Learner* (Routledge, 2003) and co-editor of *Research and Knowledge at Work* (Routledge, 2000).