

Ronald McDonald as Trickster: Marketing the Old as New

William Walker Woods

He is tall. He is dressed in bright red and yellow. His face is painted white except for his lips, which match the scarlet of his crazy hair. He smiles incessantly at your children as they romp on the playground. He is, of course, the cultural icon Ronald McDonald. Born in the boom days of the 1960s, Ronald's happy clown smile has been used as a successful marketing tool in the decades since. The year 2001 sees a revamped Ronald, however, as his creators try to adapt to a changing youth market by remaking their 1960s clown in the image of an ancient mythological type: the trickster.

Ray Kroc, founder of McDonald's hamburger chain, has surprisingly little to say about the creation of Ronald. He merely notes in his biography, *Grinding It Out*, that the introduction of the company symbol at the 1963 Macy's Thanksgiving Parade was a huge success. Kroc writes that "a great deal of study had gone into creating the appearance and personality of Ronald McDonald, right down to the color and texture of his wig. I loved Ronald. So did the kids. Even the sophisticates at *Esquire* loved him. They invited Ronald to their 'Party of the Decade' for top newsmakers of the sixties."

If statistics mean anything, people still love Ronald. A recent article notes this staggering fact: "every child in the U. S. (100%) [is] familiar with Ronald McDonald." This number is perhaps less surprising when we remember that "the Golden Arches are now the second most widely recognized symbol in the world—behind the Olympic rings and ahead of the Christian cross" (Bogus 32).

Such universal recognition brings more competition and criticism, however. In recent years the fast food chain has suffered some relatively hard times. In 1997 top management was unhappy because sales in American stores had consistently decreased over the previous two years and profit margins were eroding (Saporito 42). McDonald's USA chairman Jack Greenberg, who runs the company's 12,000 domestic restaurants, said, "There's no question we've been under more stress than we're used to" (qtd. in Saporito 42). Owners of the franchises were unhappy because rapid store expansion had cannibalized sales while recent advertising campaigns had been ineffectual. And food quality was questioned as well. According to Malcolm M. Knapp, a food-industry consultant, "McDonald's [had become] obsolete on their food—for a long time, it was good enough to be consistent and clean. Now America wants taste" (qtd. in Saporito 42). McDonald's tried to respond to America's changing taste in 1998 with the Arch Deluxe, by all accounts another failure (Saporito 42).

New sandwiches are part of the fast food wars, and obviously imitators of McDonald's — Burger King, Wendy's, and others—have hurt profits as well. What Ray Kroc pioneered is now a crowded market. McDonald's management is only too keenly aware of these changes, shortcomings, and failed campaigns. A "Basic Operations Course Manual" from the famous "Hamburger University" in Chicago notes, "Our McDonald's history is a heritage of success and continued growth that is unparalleled in our industry. As we look to the future, clearly we face many new challenges. In the past, our growth was easier due to a QSR [Quick Service Restaurant] market that was growing very quickly. Now, however, the entire QSR market expansion has dramatically slowed down. This makes sales and profits harder to achieve."

Profits and at what human cost they may be achieved were the issues behind the so-called "McLibel" action suit filed by McDonald's some years ago. The suit resulted when Greenpeace, the radical environmentalist group, circulated a leaflet accusing the corporation of being responsible for starvation in the Third World, the exploitation of children, the destruction of the rain forests, and the torture and murder of millions of animals. Though coming from the fringe, the Greenpeace accusations do represent the heightened scrutiny undergone by corporations. The

McDonald's image as innocent purveyor of fast food is now a little harder to maintain in light of its international status and power.

Considering the marketing and image problems accumulating over time, it is no wonder the recent Operations Manual concludes this way: "The time has come now for us to change!"

In keeping with that declaration, McDonald's launched new ads. Among the marketing ploys was a new line of videos, which uses animation from the creators of the popular *Rugrats* series on Nickelodeon combined with live action footage. According to an internal memo, the goal of the videos—aimed at children ages two through nine—was to "build Ronald's brand equity and emotional connection with [children] by getting as many videos in homes as possible" (qtd. in Kramer 1). In these videos Ronald is portrayed as "a friend to kids" and as a "hero who magically and sometimes comically solves mysteries and problems in exotic and exciting locations kids can easily relate to and understand" (qtd. in Kramer 40).

No one, including McDonald's, can doubt that the children's market has changed since Willard Scott donned the first Ronald makeup in 1963. Scott has long since retired from his more famous post as *The Today Show* weatherman, and the 2001-brand of children two through nine have a plethora of entertainment choices and role models. What they see in kid shows is edgier, even more defiant of traditional values. Limited by its family-oriented image, McDonald's could not and did not want to compete with *The Simpsons* or *South Park*, but it wanted to catch up to some elements of the 1990s sensibility. Of course, since constant change is now a feature of this attention-deficit entertainment world, anything purporting to be new would attract attention. So a new batch of products featuring Ronald hit the market.

In the opening credits of the first video, the emphasis is on change. Ronald ponders his destiny while examining his transformation in a mirror. The lyrics to an accompanying song proclaim, "McDonaldland is changing / Everything is rearranging." Ronald the Clown has experienced a metamorphosis into a fun-loving, powerful creature who promises children magic. His new qualities might be described as belonging to a character known by the academic world as the trickster.

Of course, the mythical figure of the trickster is not new at all. As one of the most popular archetypal motifs in myth, religion, and literature, the character appears in some form in nearly all cultures. As Paul Radin notes in his classic study of the American trickster, Wakdjunkaga, "Few other myths have persisted with their fundamental content unchanged. The Trickster myth is found in clearly recognizable form among the simplest aboriginal tribes and among the most complex" (ix). Indeed, Wakdjunkaga, thought at first to be only a Native American phenomenon, has analogues in the Greek god Hermes, the Norse god Loki, the West African trickster Ananse, and even in Asian figures such as Wu'sata, the monkey of Chinese legend.

More recent incarnations have been found in Davy Crockett, Br'er Rabbit, and fictional characters like Inspector Clouseau (*The Pink Panther*) and R. P. McMurphy (*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*). Viewers of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* can watch in reruns another trickster figure in the person of "Q," the near-omnipotent prankster-judge who bedevils the crew in several episodes.

The trickster is a cunning, charming, often problematic figure. He "is at once wise and foolish; the perpetrator of tricks and the butt of his own jokes; he is promiscuous and amoral; he is outrageous in his actions . . . ; he is profoundly inventive, creative by nature, and in some ways a helper to humanity" (Leeming 163). The list of attributes has grown as more versions of the trickster are revealed, until the definition may now be too broad, too encompassing. At any rate, as Laura Makarius points out, anyone who studies the trickster figure is "faced by a mass of contradictions" (57).

Nonetheless, according to William Hynes, certain key traits do emerge from the mass of material, and these qualities help explain how Ronald McDonald fits the type. The trickster's primary purpose is to make us laugh, to entertain us (Hynes 202). In his commercials, recordings, and videos, Ronald keeps up a healthy patter of corny jokes aimed at the target age-group, as in this example:

Question: "Why did the chicken cross the playground?"

Answer: "To get to the other slide!"

Of course, McDonald's weds education with the humor. Hynes asserts that in the old myths, "We may laugh, but a deeper unfolding is at work. At one level, the trickster bears the gift of laughter, but it is tied to another level, linked to another gift, one that invokes insight" (206-207). And we can safely assume that Ronald's message is that McDonald's is a happy place with another recreational delight, like that slide, just across the playground, making the store a great place to eat.

If Ronald is a true trickster, however, his message goes beyond consumerism. Another crucial role of the trickster is to reaffirm our core value systems. Stories of Native American tricksters were told to children by an elder member of the society, perhaps a sage. These tales were intended to teach children the proper way to behave. The uniqueness of the trickster figure is that his exploits must give the appearance of transgression of some of society's rules without destroying them. As Christopher Vescey argues, "in breaking the rules, the trickster confirms the rule" (207). In the McDonald's version of education, Ronald acts both as the trickster and, to some extent, the storyteller. He is an actor in the videos but is part of the societal structure that authorizes and tells the story found in the video. The balancing act of the new Ronald, as with all tricksters, is to tweak authority and satisfy the youthful urge for rebellion while keeping the young firmly in the grip of tradition.

Hynes reminds us that trickster myths serve as ritual vents for social frustrations (206). In events such as the Feast of Fools in Europe or the Blessing of the Grain in the Pueblo Indian culture, the trickster allowed people to laugh at very serious occasions, forget their troubles, and flout custom. The carnivale in Europe was the one time each year that peasants could ridicule their lords. This more manipulative role of the trickster takes the people's minds off real issues at hand. In the McDonald's updating of this strategy, the spectacle of a new Ronald McDonald diverts attention from the unpleasant facts of things like terrorism (or mediocre food) while satisfying a child's desire to live for a time outside authority.

Indeed, the trickster himself is primarily an outsider. Hynes says, "The trickster is cast as an 'out' person, and his actions are often outlawish, outlandish, outrageous, out-of-bounds, and out-of-order" (34). Many of the most famous trickster figures have enjoyed outlaw status, from Huckleberry Finn to Bart Simpson. According to Lurie Alison, the whole tradition of juvenile literature includes a "subversive" element. Works in this genre "express ideas and emotions not generally approved of or even recognized at the time; they make fun of honored figures and piously held beliefs; and they view social pretense with clear-eyed directness" (4).

Viewing things from the margins, as it were, the trickster at times contradicts, or at least complicates, his role as enforcer of social mores. For this reason, Ronald's identity as a clown plays right into the image of the trickster as outsider. Clowns have themselves been part of the marginal minority, characters bizarre and sometimes a little frightening. Their marginal status enables them to serve a purpose: "The clown performs an extraordinarily alive and immediate ritual of introduction into the consciousness of his audience, of the relatively neglected elements in the life of individuals in the community" (Charles 33).

Thus the cartoon world of Ronald is populated by creatures that would be unwelcome in real life, with their grotesque cuteness and strange habits. Furthermore, adults are largely prohibited from Ronald's world, or if they are included, become objects of mild ridicule. The authors of the song "That's My Ronald," provided free in Happy Meals at the outset of the new campaign, portray their character as separate from the adult world of conformity. Who better, the song says, to transform the ordinary, to "make the boring-est things real cool, one who's not afraid to bend the rules." Competing with Nintendo and other games that supply instant gratification, Ronald must be packaged with at least a hint of the rebel, or at least a transformer of the mundane. Hoping to kindle interest in Ronald as a "situation-inverter" à la the trickster of myth, the song asks, "Who can make a goldfish bark?"

Mythical tricksters, of course, were often truly transgressive. For example, some figures displayed overtly sexual behavior and body parts. McDonald's keeps Ronald's big shoes, once a phallic symbol in such characters, but obviously avoids any suggestion of double meanings. The paraphernalia and odd behavior function as symbols of another lesson embedded in the trickster myths: possibilities for growth and development (Turner 125).

The trickster is viewed as creator of society, or at least as a substantial contributor to the birth and evolution of culture. Again, without putting too fine a point on it, Ronald attempts precisely this in the cassette *That's My Ronald*. The first stanza introduces him as a powerful figure, asking, "Who spreads magic all around?" The answer to this question, and all that will follow, is, of course, Ronald McDonald. Happy children's voices practically squeal in delight as they answer again and again with the jingle's refrain: "That's my Ronald!" Ronald belongs to them, to us, to everyone. Later in the first stanza, Ronald is spoken of as able to "pull things out of thin air," like a magician.

In the new videos, he literally creates a magical world of McFry Goblin Kids, talking dogs (a recently introduced sidekick named Sundae), Hamburglars, and the like. This strange world stimulates curiosity, a first cousin to the discovery of new possibilities. Tricksters are consistently "agents of creativity" (Hynes 211), psychic explorers and adventurers. The trickster possesses the ability to alter not only his own shape but also the world around him. Witness another recent McDonald's ad in which aliens land in McDonaldland to steal all the precious french fries. In a period of thirty seconds, Ronald defies gravity, uses a straw to suck the alien's spaceship back into the pull of earth's gravity, and, naturally, saves the day. This brief scenario is followed by a quick advertisement for a Happy Meal toy, one of the highly coveted *Bug's Life* action figures. In this clip, Ronald finds himself magically shrunk to the size of a bug and trapped in a bottle, but kids know that he will escape in time for the next transformation.

Neither the jingle nor the video forgets to tie Ronald's creative power to the trickster's most positive trait: his role as helper of men, or in this case, of boys and girls. The Ronald McDonald House charities, long known for ministering to families of hospitalized children, provides a real-life substance behind the silly entertainment. Ronald is "a friend to all," "a pal," "a fun guy to hang out with." Throughout the song, he tells jokes, loves to play "any time of day," helps children climb trees, and "has a way of doing things that makes [the children] want to laugh and sing." For all the adventures, the larger-than-life creature ends up being a postmodern sage imparting life lessons around a contemporary version of the campfire: an entertainment center.

With the move to a trickster Ronald, McDonald's hoped to refurbish its image as part of the plan to revitalize business. Almost four years into the new Ronald, however, profits seem to remain stagnant. Considering the fragmented market and the recent general economic downturn, no one should blame the smiling spokesman. This popular cultural icon, so identified with his corporation's success, may not yet have fulfilled the role of savior, but the marketing blitz begun in the late '90s—recordings, ad campaign, and new line of home videos—continues an attempt to enhance the company's position among its target audience: children. Consciously or not, the corporate giant has recreated Ronald McDonald in the image of a sanitized trickster figure, offering just a hint of the scandal of transgression while staying tame enough to keep parents happy and the money flowing.

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William W. Woods is an assistant professor of English and communications at Schreiner University, Kerrville, Texas, where he is faculty sponsor of the Texas Alpha Sigma chapter. Although his work is primarily in creative writing, his interest in popular culture studies has led to presentations at the Popular Culture Association and American Culture Association conferences.