

## The Virtual Leader

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To appear in Bryman, A., Collinson, D., Grint, K., Jackson, B. and Uhl-Bien, M. (Eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Leadership*.

This chapter provides a critical review and evaluation of the idea and practices of the ‘virtual leader’. The virtual leader is an image of an organization leader, actual or fictional, that has been simulated and virtualized through the mass media – a leader who is purposefully created by an organization but who is variably distanced from association with, or representation of, a real person. Drawing on Baudrillard’s (1983) theorization of the process of simulation, we explore how an important and potent dimension of contemporary leadership is its increasing mutation away from the materiality of the leader towards a simulated leadership enabled by changes in mass media technology and popular culture. The virtual leader becomes a ‘hyperreal’ – a copy of a leader void of an original. With virtualization leadership can be enhanced and empowered such that it is no longer about the actions of persons, but rather is a function that is performed for and on the organization by the cultural ‘imaginary’ of what leadership signifies. Leadership is a function of this imaginary in that it exceeds the confines of the human body and, in so doing, can increase the potency and ability of leadership. The virtual leader, we maintain, enhances the capacity for transformational leadership in organizations, and for organizational transformation (Boje and Rhodes, 2005b). This ‘hyper-real’ leadership is a potent fantasy of leadership where leadership is disembodied in practice yet accelerated in effectivity. Moreover the embodied representations of the virtual leader are also manifestations of gendered affects which are enormously powerful in shaping organizational identity and performance.

The chapter unfolds in three stages, beginning with a rehearsal of Boje and Rhodes’ (2005a)<sup>1</sup> analysis of virtual leadership. Three orders of virtual leadership are discussed and then illustrated with examples from the fast food industry. These three orders are: (1) the virtual leader as an imitation of a *former flesh-and-blood leader*; (2) the virtual leader as a *creative re-representation of a former leader*; and (3) the virtual leader as a *fabricated leader* with no direct relation to an actual person. Having discussed these three orders we then go on to consider the relations between gender and virtual leadership in the second part of the paper. Here we explore how gendered norms infiltrate virtual leadership, such that while the virtualization of leadership is a radical departure from conventional ideas of leadership, it also serves to reinforce established, repressive gender stereotypes. This leads us to conclude more generally that despite changes in its cultural expression, leadership remains problematically located within a dominant masculine model. In the third and final stage of the paper we problematize this gendered reading to consider a more radical form of virtualised leadership – where the virtual is paradoxically embodied and disembodied, and which attempts to destabilize gender binaries. In bringing the chapter to a close we argue that virtual leadership has the capacity to transcend the persistent gender dualisms prevalent in leadership research, even though this potential is largely waiting to be realised.

### THREE ORDERS OF VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP

In his 1983 book *Simulations*, Jean Baudrillard explores the historical changes that have occurred in terms of how we understand the relationship between representations and reality.

His particular focus is on how in contemporary times the idea that such representations are reflective of an underlying reality has been radically brought into questions. Starting with the Renaissance period, Baudrillard argues that with the growth of the bourgeoisie as a new class in Europe, the relationship between signs and reality began to radically alter. Emerging at this time was the idea of the *counterfeit* such that clear demarcation is made between a representation and an original. With particular reference to architecture and art work, the counterfeit is seen as an imitation of reality; the idea being that while reality is still seen to exist, the counterfeit is a distorted or inaccurate imitation of it. With the dawn of the industrial era, Baudrillard noted the emergence of a new symbolic order – that of *production*. At this time the development of mass production technologies enabled representations to go beyond being just imitations or counterfeits – for the first time objects could be endlessly reproduced as copies of each other without needing to be related to any notion of an original. Unlike an imitation, the mass-produced item reproduced an image of itself, as the idea that there was an original material to be copied begins to dissipate. In the contemporary era Baudrillard noted a third symbolic order ushered in with the move from mechanical to digital technology. In this third order there is no discernable difference between representations and originals. Representations are now understood as copies without originals that replace an actual reality with a simulated *hyperreality*. Our consideration of virtual leadership uses Baudrillard's three orders – counterfeit, production and simulacra - to explore the different extent to which leaders can be virtualized in the mass media and the effects of this virtualization in terms of leadership. We now review these three orders using examples of virtual leaders in the fast food industry.

### **The Virtual Leader As An Imitation Of A Former Flesh-And-Blood Leader**

Between 1989 and his death in 2002, Dave Thomas, the founder of the Wendy's hamburger restaurant chain, appeared in all of the company's more than 800 commercials. He was even listed in the Guinness Book of World Records for the longest running advertising campaign featuring the founder of a company. Thomas founded *Wendy's Old Fashioned Hamburgers* on 15 November 1969, leading its franchising in the early 1970s, taking it public in 1976 (with 500 locations), and later transforming it into *Wendy's International Inc.* Following a merger with another fast food organization in 2008 Wendy's is now part of the Wendy's/Arby's Group, Inc. – the third largest fast food corporation in the world. As part of this group Wendy's continues to operate as an independent brand with 6,600 outlets in 22 countries.

While Thomas' leadership of Wendy's clearly took the company to commercial success, it was in 1989 that he started an even more dramatic role as Wendy's spokesperson in their comical, sometimes whacky TV commercials that helped the company rebound from a difficult period in the mid-1980s when earnings sank. These commercials presented Thomas not as a suited corporate leader, but as a 'regular guy'. Wearing 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 role in these 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' transition from CEO to celebrity status television spokesperson illustrates the first order of virtual leadership. 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.

As he was beginning to be virtualized what Thomas could do as a leader changed. 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. Wendy's exploited this successfully by virtualizing Thomas in the image of a folk hero. In 2005, the organization claimed 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.<sup>2</sup>

Even after Thomas' death Wendy's continues to draw on his character in its public image, even though he does not appear in the most recent advertising campaigns. He is still featured heavily on Wendy's web-site as ‘the man behind the hot 'n juicy hamburger’<sup>3</sup> In 2002 Wendy's even commenced an advertising campaign based on the slogan “prepared Dave's way”..

Wendy's used Thomas' virtualization to establish a particular image for the corporation that achieved the transformational leadership task of promulgating its corporate values (House & Shamir, 1993). With Thomas as virtual leader, Wendy's was able to create a corporate image that supported its ongoing success. This transformation was such that the task of the virtualized transformational leader was that of “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). Even to this day the organization uses Thomas as the bedrock of its way of doing business. As Wendy's former chairman and CEO Jack Schuessler said several years ago: “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). Thomas' virtualized leadership focused on setting an example to others through his down to earth style (Bass, 1999) and on propagating a set of organizational values (House and Shamir, 2003). 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' own values are still publicized by the organization: ‘quality is our recipe’, ‘do the right thing’, ‘treat people with respect’, ‘profit is 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.

What we find with Wendy's was an attempt to approach the first order of the virtual leader through the mass mediatization of Thomas. By making him a household name as a regular guy, a good father and grandfather, Wendy's was able to 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 of community, care and honesty that it aspired to. The result is that Thomas is virtualized only in a fairly minimal way, because his leadership relied on an embodied presence – even after death,

## **The Virtual Leader As A Creative Re-Representation Of A Former Leader**

Whereas Dave Thomas represents being a first order virtual leader at Wendy's, it is Colonel Sanders, the iconic image of KFC, who takes this leadership in the direction of the second order – as a creative re-representation. 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 September 9, 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 named 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 then Governor of Kentucky Ruby Laffoon for his contribution to Kentucky cuisine. By 1964, when Sanders sold the business to investors for \$2 million, Kentucky Fried Chicken had six hundred outlets. In 1969 the company went public with Sanders being the first shareholder. In early 2009 KFC has in excess of 11,000 restaurants in over 80 countries<sup>4</sup>.

Although officially ending his ownership of Kentucky Fried Chicken almost 40 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 and 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 virtual leader. He represented the corporation's espoused values through his being mass mediated as a heroic leader with a unique and virtuous character. Whilst Thomas was the regular guy, Sanders was the eccentric Southern gentleman replete with white suit, red shoe lace tie and exaggerated white beard. This masculine father like character gave the organization an aura of authenticity with his 'secret' herbs and spices and his living out the American dream through his epic rags to riches story. Even today, his photograph appears on the main page of KFC's web-site looking down paternally at an array of fried chicken products.<sup>5</sup> His stylized image also graces the containers in which the food is served.

For 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. After a fall in consumer interest, the need to revive Kentucky Fried Chicken, led to the older campaign was revived with Sanders look-alikes in 1990. Still operating in the first order of virtual leadership, the new theatric image was an imitation of Sanders' 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 in this period that the company changed its branding from Kentucky Fried Chicken to KFC, thus silencing the word 'fried' to respond to a demand for healthy eating! 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 the deceased corporate founder's first order virtual leadership by contemporarizing his virtual essence for a new generation of consumers, systematically orchestrated in an animated Colonel. The new colonel was increasingly distanced from the

actual person that its image was representing. In Baudrillard's (1983) terms the new image liquidated the real of the first order and absorbed its appearance. In this order, rather than an imitative theatre there is a repetitive production whereby the image becomes increasingly distanced from the actual original so as to be a copy of itself – as in the case of mass production. In terms of virtual leadership, however, the animated Colonel failed to take on leadership qualities rendering him instead a foolish cartoon. He was narrated as both the founder of the organization and as a cartoon character, but the second narration lacked any form of leadership. Furthermore, although the first order Colonel performed a leadership function in terms of embodying the corporation's values, the animated Colonel moved towards the second order of simulacra, 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. The body of the Colonel was an artefact, commodified in a new genre of advertising. This colonel was virtualized through the mass media to attract younger consumers, but in the process his leadership capacity was significantly diminished.

Despite the corporation's continued use of the Colonels' image to establish a sense of authenticity, his 'leadership' has not been used to address organizational transformation outside of the realm of marketing and advertising. In the case of Colonel Sanders the increasing levels of virtualization meant that his representation was less and less able to provide a leadership function, thus questioning the success of disembodied forms of leadership. Whilst based on a highly masculine representation of the Colonel, the cartoon deconstructs Colonel Sander's hyper-masculine legacy through gimmickry.

### **The Virtual Leader As A Fabricated Leader With No Direct Relation To An Actual Person**

With Dave Thomas we saw a movement towards a first order of virtual leadership. In Colonel Sanders we saw the unrealized potential for a second order. It is in Ronald McDonald, however, that we see the most successful virtual leader and the one who is the most virtualized. 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. American children have ranked 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 McDonalds towards 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% during Cantalupo's tenure as CEO, from \$16.08 in December 2002 to \$27.46 in April 2004).

By 6 am on the same day as 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. 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* (Coupland, 1991) image of dead end, no skill work in fast food outlets. 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."<sup>6</sup> 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 emotion to corporate grief. A clown, full of excess, dealing with hard emotions; an attempt to make light a leaderless ship As we will explore, this is an indicative demonstration that Ronald has achieved the status of a third order virtual leader. 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. In this capacity Ronald did what actual transformational leaders do: he worked to influence people to ensure the organization achieves its strategic corporate objectives (Kapica, 2004). The clown replacing the corporate man is surely inspired by Bahktin, or the fool in King Lear by Shakespeare. His leadership involved espousing the company's vision (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 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).

Even though KFC and Wendy's virtualized former owners performed in comedic, even clown-like ways, with Ronald, McDonald's has gone the full way towards a third order of virtual leadership. Ronald approaches being a hyperreal 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 virtual leadership 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). For the corporation, this means that Ronald can perform a much greater variety of leadership functions because he is no longer constrained by the limitations of an actual person – although 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. Ronald as a male clown operates without the hyper-masculinity associated with male forms of leadership. In this way, the aggressive leadership function of McDonald's is masked by the more androgynous masquerade of Ronald – the clown.

## **FEMININE VIRTUAL LEADERS**

Ronald McDonald, Colonel Sanders and Dave Thomas are not those who leadership research traditionally defines as transformational leaders, with the likes of Richard Branson and Steve Jobs acting as ideal role models for aspiring leaders. As we have illustrated, however, once

virtualized in the mass media, leaders can still perform leadership functions. In part virtual leaders are substitutes for traditional leadership (Kerr and Jermier, 1978; Jermier and Kerr, 1997; Howell, 1997; Howell and Dorfman, 1981). This substitution can operate at a transactional level where the virtual leader is, in our examples, a spokes-character or an iconic symbol for selling fast food. It can also operate at a transformational level where the virtual leader is stylized and orchestrated to mimic leadership virtues as well as to provide the organization with a means to narrate a new identity. Although in part this suggests that leadership might be collapsing into media and marketing, it also suggests that the creation of successful brand icons themselves are not tantamount to the creation of virtual leaders. Indeed, as we have explored, the leadership potential of the virtual leader varies qualitatively in relation to the character of the icon itself. Hence whilst marketing is a necessary condition for the virtualization of leadership it is not a sufficient one. Leadership narratives and simulation are also necessary.

What is clearly evident in our illustration of virtual leadership so far is that all of the leaders we have discussed – whether they are real or virtualised – are men. Furthermore, Sanders and Thomas clearly exhibit a wealth of masculinity, and this is perhaps unsurprising given the observation that “the dominant type of behaviour deemed appropriate for managers in contemporary organizations coincides with the image of masculinity” (Ford, 2006: 81). To have one’s virtualised leaders gendered as men makes sense, because it is the image of the man that is culturally accepted as being associated with leadership – to drive organizations, to penetrate markets, to harness community, and in our case of fast food, to put food on the table for the American family. Indeed, it has been suggested that the leadership behaviours associated with femininity have long been largely a secret (Rosener, 1995) or even to read leadership is to read male (Oseen, 2002) even though it has traditionally been void of gendered analysis. To become a successful female leader equates as Wacjman claims to ‘managing like a man’ (1998). Indeed, management has long been thought of as synonymous with masculinity (Kerfoot and Knights, 1993; Due Billing and Alvesson, 2002; Pullen, 2006; Pullen and Simpson 2009) and studies of leadership largely assume masculinity as the norm (Oseen, 2002; Pullen and Rhodes, 2008) whether its gendered nature is highlighted or not.

Due Billing and Alvesson discuss the differences between masculine and feminine orientations to leadership suggesting that the former involves “instrumentality, autonomy, result-orientation, etc. something which is not particularly much in line with what is broadly assumed to be typical for females” (2002: 144). They propose that female oriented leadership would be more participatory, non-hierarchical, flexible and group-oriented. But as they caution that while “constructing leadership as feminine may be of some value as a contrast to conventional ideas on leadership and management but may also create a misleading impression of women's orientation to leadership as well as reproducing stereotypes and the traditional gender division of labour” (p.144). In other words the gender dialectic remains intact as feminine forms of leadership are introduced in a subservient relationship to dominant male models of leadership. Indeed the problem of gender labelling (Due Billing and Alvesson, 2002) has been problematised in relation to women’s leadership values (Gherardi, 1995, Höpfl 2003, Pullen 2006, Pullen and Rhodes 2008), recognising the commodification of femininity. Whilst some research suggests that masculine leadership is more effective, some other research suggests that sex advantage in leadership is overstated (for example, Vecchio, 2002). Furthermore, there are debates surrounding the gendered nature of leadership questioning whether femininity disrupts leadership success and female progression. Korabik (1990) for example proposed an androgynous model of leadership for women which has the potential to overcome bias toward feminine women. But androgyny is not neutral; the

suppression of the feminine is a neutering (after Höpfl (2003)) and this is not neutral. Our point in relation to women's leadership is that leadership research has been constrained by a dependence on gender categories; specifically that to be a female leader you either need to practice masculinity or you need to harness particular feminine skills that women naturally possess (Fondas, 1997). But you must not be too feminine and you must not be too different. And if androgyny is a preferred option then this is a risky strategy which destroys otherness.

To explore the gendered nature of virtual leadership, we start by exploring female virtual leaders. Just as there are far fewer female leaders in organizations, so too are there fewer virtual female leaders. When female virtual leaders do exist, however, they take on quite different forms to their male counterparts. In the cases of Saunders and Thomas in particular, masculinity is a dominant characteristic. Commonly female virtual leaders are fictional – either made-up characters, or developed by using a woman's name and avatar to respond to particular audience, especially a female – domestic - audience. As a case in point we consider Betty Crocker of the General Mills food company – a woman who never actually existed, but was fabricated in the early 1920s as the company's response to requests for answers to baking questions. In 1921, managers decided that signing the responses personally would be more 'intimate' and so they combined the last name of a retired company executive, William Crocker, with the first name "Betty," which was thought of as "warm and friendly." With these actions General Mills engaged in a direct commodification of the feminine as a marketing strategy. The famous Betty Crocker signature came from a secretary who won a contest among female employees. (The same signature still appears on Betty Crocker products). In 1924, Betty Crocker was given a voice for the first cooking show on American Radio. The success of Betty Crocker stemmed, we argue, from everyday women needing to identify with a public female figure, a domestic goddess to aspire to.

Until 1936, Betty Crocker was an invented cultural icon until she was given a face<sup>7</sup>. Artist Neysa McMein brought together all the women in the company's Home Service Department and "blended their features into an official likeness." So whilst Crocker was fictional, she represented, and was created from, real women – an ideal type to which they might aspire. The widely circulated portrait reinforced the popular belief that Betty Crocker was a real woman. One public opinion poll rated her as the second most famous woman in America after Eleanor Roosevelt. Over eight decades, Crocker's face changed seven times: she became younger in 1955; she became a "professional" woman in 1980; and in 1996 she became multicultural, acquiring a slightly darker and more "ethnic" look. Interestingly, dressed in a red jacket and white blouse (that changed with fashion changes through the decades), Crocker presented formally, professional, strong and very much in control. But was Crocker a feminist icon of her day, given her ability to lead the women of America?

By 1945 the virtual character was voted as being the second most famous woman in America. Through blanket media coverage Betty Crocker performed a leadership function by leading the General Mills company through changing cultural demands placed on the organization through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although this demonstrates a form of leadership, in the case of Betty Crocker the virtualization is the creation of hyper-femininity – she is more feminine than feminine. Akin to Ronald McDonald, this sees her emerge through the third order of simulation, but instead of being disembodied as a fabricated leader, her visual shows that she is 'all woman'. From a leadership perspective this is most effective, but we can add that what is virtualized is a highly contained and conservative image of femininity. Crocker is the uber-housewife who, unlike the masculine virtual leaders, provides a form of leadership based on serving male organization. Crocker exudes domesticity (and possibly servitude), so while



virtualised, her position in the organizational order is other. She is the ‘good woman’ that we were once told needed to be behind every man – and indeed she remains behind the woman who is behind every man. A construction of corporate necessity – a service provided for women’s service in the home.

In stark contrast to Crocker we take as our second example of feminine virtual leadership Aunt Jemima of the Quaker Oats Company. Whilst the image of Crocker is of an idealized middle American housewife Aunt Jemima received much criticism. Aunt Jemima is a trademark for pancake flour, syrup, and other breakfast foods. The trademark dates to 1893, although the Quaker Oats Company first registered the Aunt Jemima trademark in April, 1937. The term ‘Aunt Jemima’ is sometimes used colloquially as a female version of the derogatory label ‘Uncle Tom’. In this context, the slang term ‘Aunt Jemima’ refers to a black woman who is perceived as obsequiously servile or acting in, or protective of, the interests of white people ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aunt\\_Jemima](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aunt_Jemima), visited 16 February 2009).

Aunt Jemima started out as a character in the image of an American black maid or cook– a ‘mammy’ – and then gradually evolved through the cultural perceptions of black women in (white) American culture (see Hooks (1999) for an academic discussion of black women in America). Indeed, like Crocker, Aunt Jemima led her organization through the cultural changes of the century as reflected in dominant and hegemonic images of femininity. Aunt Jemima was depicted as a plump, smiling, bright-eyed, African-American woman, originally wearing a kerchief over her hair. In marketing materials she was originally depicted as a former slave. From 1890 to the 1960s Aunt Jemima was played by a series of actresses who depicted the characteristics of the original fictional and cartoon character. The Aunt Jemima image has been modified several times over the years. In her most recent 1989 make-over, as she reached her 100th anniversary, the 1968 image was updated, with her kerchief removed to reveal a natural hairdo and pearl earrings and remains with the products to this day. She depicted an image that all American families need – a maid that could provide stability of service at home. There is a paradox in Aunt Jemima’s leadership abilities at an organizational level, and her subordination as a black maid for American families. Whilst accepting the offensiveness that the Aunt Jemima trademark caused to African-Americans, it is the first time in history that a black woman provided virtual leadership. Further, although a ‘mammy’ Quaker Oats commodified otherness, the presence of the other as a trademark which had the capacity to change opinion. Unfortunately this is within the realm of pancakes and syrup.

With the examples of Aunt Jemima and Betty Crocker, we can see clearly that it is not just men who are virtualised for organizational purposes – indeed both of these characters, like Ronald McDonald, represent an advanced stage of virtualization in that they are imitations that do not have an original in terms of a flesh and blood person. But, in stark contrast both Aunt Jemima and Betty Crocker are based on the flesh of real women – women identify with real women and not clowns. Ronald masquerade is humorous, Crocker and Jemima have no humour. Through their virtualization, the female virtual leaders do not signify actual leaders but are brought together through an amalgam of cultural stereotypes of femininity put to the service of the organization that they represent. In these cases, femininity becomes branded for the emotional labour desired by the organization. Although the gender of male leaders is largely implicit (although neglected) (see Oseen, 2002), the gendered character of female leaders –and their bodies - are commodified by their excessive femininity and their being associated with what are traditional female forms of labour, in this case cooking (and being a good cook at that). Female virtual leaders are also strongly associated with their physical form. They are coupled with the cultural stereotypes of being maternal and feminine –

nurturing, caring, servile, unthreatening, soft especially in the case of Aunt Jemima. Indeed they create a sense of cultural community, garnering the support of their nations.

Both Betty Crocker and Aunt Jemima are little more than mascots for their respective companies. Neither has a person portraying them in public appearances, nor do they have virtual or cartoon images making statements or taking action. Instead, they are the virtualization of the symbolic and figurehead functions of leadership. They are not inspirational and transformational as are our male fast-food virtual leaders. Thus we see gender stereotyping reflected in the virtualization of leadership. Further, as evidenced by the lack of female virtual leaders in the fast food industry, there appear to be fewer female exemplars in the realm of virtual leadership, mirroring the underrepresentation of women leaders in the corporate world in general. One estimate indicates 12.5% of Fortune 500 executives are women, and only 3.8% Fortune 500 top officers are women (Nelson and Quick, 2002). The glass ceiling appears to extend to the realm of virtual leaders. But as our discussion of female leaders and their relationship to femininity suggests, theorists of gender and leadership get caught within and between the production of gender dualisms. As Bowring rightly states:

Gender dualisms underlying leadership research is that male is the universal, neutral, subject, thus creating the female Other as a crucial partner to the universalist claims that it makes about leadership. Thus, leaders are separate from followers (non-leaders), and males as leaders, separate from females (non-leaders) (2004: 383).

As we have seen our examples, Aunt Jemima and Betty Crocker do not have the leadership prowess of their male counterparts. In our analysis we have reinforced the production of gender stereotypes on two levels. One, we have equated femininity with female leadership and masculinity with masculine leadership, and two, we have argued that feminine leadership, even when the leader is fictional, relies on women's material bodies thereby reinforcing the embodiment of women lives in organizations. If we are to think differently about female leaders and the importance of femininity in leadership research, we need to start thinking differently – thinking beyond categorisation (Oseen, 2002; Calás and Smircich, 1993; Bowring, 2004) because there are harmful effects to continuing placing such value on the differentials between feminine and masculine leadership (Calás and Smircich, 1993 cited in Bowring, 2004: 384). As such virtual leadership, and leadership more generally, is caught within what Butler calls the heterosexual matrix (see Bowring (2004)). Butler, drawing on Foucault, questions categories of gender and sexuality. Gender is a discursive, performative act, ever changing within power relations. To challenge the gendered dialectic of virtual leadership, we need to think beyond heteronormative leadership theories.

Although we have discussed Ronald McDonald above, Ronald as clown through an excessive masquerade transcends criticisms of hegemonic masculinity which we could mount of Sanders and Thomas. Ronald's masquerade is an androgynous gender performance, but McDonalds recognised the limits to Ronald's gender-neutral masquerade. To contemporalize Ronald in popular culture, we turn to an example which shows the queering of virtual leadership. By queering we mean the challenge and subversion of heterosexual relations, following gender and sexuality as socially constructed and emergent (Sedgwick, 1990; Butler, 1990). Recognising that Ronald was not popular in every country, McDonalds responded. His statues have mostly been removed in UK stores and in 2005 he was restylized, and his gender changed in Japan (see <http://peaceaware.com/McD/>). Taking the Japanese reincarnation as an illustration of queering, Ronald is female, young, wearing a 1960s inspired red and white top with yellow dress, yellow gloves and red high heels. Ronald

is very feminine and highly sexualized. In one photograph there is a seductive pose into the lens of the camera, lips pouting and leather gloved poised on the lip. Flowing auburn red shoulder length hair floats around a feminine face. In another photograph there is a young man, wearing a 1960s inspired suit in red with yellow accessories. He has long red hair. This boy and Ronald as female look very similar, and are very feminine. Is this McDonald's attempt to transcend gender roles? The images capture a certain playfulness, elusiveness and seductiveness. Furthermore, this potential gender blurring, and the co-presence of boy with the female Ronald, maybe an attempt to upset heterosexual norms through elusivity.

In contemporary times we may wish to argue that the future of leadership research requires the advancement of thinking less conservatively about gendered leadership roles; placing more emphasis on the deconstruction of a gender dialectic that continues to simplify both gender and sexuality in organizations. These masquerades of gender enable the real and fantasy, and the male and female to be transcended, but perhaps only when we queer leadership theory that we can fully take part in the debate (see Parker, 2002 on the queering of organizational theory). As Bowring strongly claims:

If queer is 'an attempt to disrupt, to subvert, to set aside, compulsory heterosexuality, and the gendered binary oppositions that come with it' (Hollinger, 1999: p.25) then it is a powerful way of moving towards fluidity in the theorizing and practice of both gender and leadership. All that is required is for us to subvert taken-for-grantedness by understanding that cause and effect are not always what we assume them to be. (2004: 402)

It leaves us wondering whether the virtual leaders illuminated here will remain the cultural icons and organization trademarks that they currently are.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the discussion above, we have explored how leaders can become virtualized at three different levels. A first order where the virtual leader is an imitation of an actual human leader, a second order where the virtual leader is a re-representation and mutation of an actual human leader, and a third order where the virtual leader 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' cartoon counterfeit is still recognizably a copy of him. Colonel Sanders', as he has been modified throughout the years, continues to slip away from his referentiality to the original founder of the organization. In the cases of Ronald McDonald, Betty Crocker and Aunt Jemima, their leadership requires no person for them to be imitating; although we add that Ronald's clown form makes him appear less 'real' than any of the others. Both Ronald and Betty have experienced "make-overs." Ronald got thinner to accommodate the nutrition emphasis of the early 2000s, and Betty's whole look was updated successively to keep her contemporary. Such changes are more easily mandated by corporations when their virtual leaders are of the third order simulacra, with no real person to offer potentially embarrassing inconsistencies.

While any of the three orders of virtual leadership can perform leadership functions, it is at the third level – that of the hyperreal, that transformational leadership is most potent. In the first order of the virtual leader, leaders such as Thomas and the Colonel can be used to depict

an epic story of masculine leadership, for example by 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 (Pawar and Eastman, 1997; Yukl, 1999) 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' as virtual leader 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 and more recently was dropped from the advertising campaigns all together. It also explains that 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 the virtual leader his full transformational leadership was realized. As a *hyperreal* virtual leader Ronald is not limited by the actuality of any leader before him, and is therefore able to metamorphize into the type of character that can perform the leadership function the organization deems that it requires.

What our discussion has also shown is that while the virtualization of leadership marks an important shift in its functioning, it also reproduces and amplifies the gender stereotypes and norms present in actual leadership. It is through this virtualized reproduction that gender becomes excessive in the way it is used to exemplify leadership – this is indeed the case for both the male and female virtual leaders. This works such that the male virtual leaders are glorified as entrepreneurs, and typify particular character traits - traits largely coterminous with 'transformational leadership' and its association with stereotypes of heroic and individualistic masculinity (cf, Kark, 2004). In the case of the female virtual leaders, the same tendency is present – they are both hyper-real and hyper feminized, most specially in terms of representing an exaggerated femininity centred around caring and nurturing roles performed in a domestic labour context.

In conclusion, virtual leadership offers the corporation greater control over its leadership function. As a result, the virtual leader examples strongly reflect corporate gender-based biases. The virtual leader's success in terms of transformational potential may depend on the corporation's ability to simulate the spark and charisma of the great leader. Ronald McDonald may be the precursor of an era of super-hero-like leaders rivalling Santa Claus in name recognition, able to shed real tears as easily as pounds of body weight, and able to be many places at once tirelessly doing good works around the globe at the corporation's bidding. And while corporations are busy creating the supermen of virtual leadership, the Betty Crockers and Aunt Jemimas are standing by holding the capes, all dutifully loyal Lois Lanes. So, while virtualization may enhance the power of leadership, it does little to dispel its gendered culture. If it is the case that "a new symbolic structure must be created if new ways of thinking about the leader and of leadership are to be thought which create a space for women other than as imitation men or excavated women" (Oseen, 2002: 170) then despite all of its symbolic manipulation, virtual leadership does not do this. Indeed, an important conclusion from our discussion of virtual leadership is that the need for feminine leadership to be unbounded from the realms of women and their subordination remains pressing. Virtual leadership as it pertains to the relationship between gender, the body, and fantasy and reality raises important issues for the ways in which organizations employ and profit from virtual forms of leadership. Clearly, this is gendered. However if organizations are to keep up with changing consumer interests, then they will need to thinking through the forms of virtual leadership they exploit.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> These beginning parts of the chapter are based on an updated summary on Boje and Rhodes 2005a paper.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from the special section of the Wendy's web-site devoted to Dave Thomas' legacy (<http://www.wendys.com/dave/flash.html>, visited 3 March 2005).

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.wendys.com/about\\_us/](http://www.wendys.com/about_us/), visited 25 February 2008

<sup>4</sup> This data comes from the KFC web site, <http://www.kfc.com/about/>, visited on 26 February 2008.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.kfc.com/> visited 28 February 2009

<sup>6</sup> The tear ad (without caption) as it ran in color version in USA Today on April 21 2004 can be seen at [http://www.adage.com/images/random/ronald0421\\_big.jpg](http://www.adage.com/images/random/ronald0421_big.jpg) (visited 9 July, 2004)

<sup>7</sup> see <http://chnm.gmu.edu/features/sidelights/crocker.html> Accessed 24th February 2009