

ICON OF THE MONTH

The world's second most familiar brand – like its first, Coca-Cola – is a non-essential that has been identified, by astute and relentless marketing, as a *sine qua non* of a fun-loving life. What McDonald's offers is in every sense meat and drink to the modern world.

The company came into being in response to an actual want – for inexpensive food of dependable quality available quickly to families on the hoof (or rather the tyre). The first drive-by restaurant was opened by the brothers Maurice 'Mac' and Dick McDonald in 1948 in San Bernardino, 60 miles east of Los Angeles.

Soon, there were queues round the block for their 15c hamburgers and 10c fries. The phenomenon was noted by a travelling salesman called (wonderfully) Ray Kroc. He bought the franchise, and in due course the business. The rest, as they say, is McHistory.

Today, 24,500 outlets in 114 countries (and counting) rack up sales of \$33 billion a year – in Britain alone serving 500 million meals. McDonald's has a larger economy than Nigeria.

The core of the concept remains a facile happiness. The marketing, even within Britain, may be variegated, waggishly advertising low prices to adults while offering highly collectables to children, but the consistent message of the ubiquitous 'golden' arches is that this way lies the warm glow in the heart as well as the stomach. The promise of those smiling faces and corny product names is that along with your burger'n'fries you will be served

the milkshake of human kindness.

In the not-so-free world, the selling proposition is somewhat different. It is not Ronald McDonald who entices Russians and Chinese to stand in patient lines to purchase food that for them is anything but fast or cheap, but the illusion that eating a Happy Meal will somehow induct them into a consumerist utopia. The Big Mac is the



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No 10: McDonald's

American Way in a sesame-seed bun.

Kuwait City celebrated its liberation from Saddam Hussein with the opening of its first, identikit outlet in 1994. People queued and waited for seven miles, the corporation's own website notes with satisfaction, 'proving once again that "Good Times, Great Taste" is understandable in any language.'

The irony is that the values with

which the food is saturated have little to do with freedom and democracy and love of one's fellow man. The zeal for global domination of McDonald's marketing men would do credit to the Comintern. Theirs is a form of cultural imperialism which talks in the language of idealism but has no higher purpose than to expand and make money.

In December, the half-a-million people who will venture inside the Arctic Circle to Rovaniemi, which the Finns 'acknowledge' as the official home of Santa Claus, will be able to glimpse, between the snow-laden trees, that familiar flash of red. And yellow. Another corner of the world's imagination has been annexed.

Nor is the corporation averse to using its power to crush opposition. The longest-running libel case in English legal history pitted McDonald's against two individuals, Helen Steel and David Morris, who had handed out flyers alleging (among other things) that it maltreated animals, exploited its staff and played a large part in the deforestation of the Amazon.

After seven years, the corporation won. Its trademark *bonhomie* had, strangely, not been in evidence.

Junk food is a fitting symbol for an addictive, infantile junk culture which since the Second World War has conquered the world. 'Enjoy more,' urges the McDonald's slogan. If only people would.

'I have come that they might have life,' said Jesus. And not in a bun.

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