

Folklore, Media-Lore & Modernity: An Introduction

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Introduction

This special themed issue of *Coolabah* features a series of papers exploring the connections between various forms of folklore and modernity and the development of contemporary media-lore. The concept of media-lore is a relatively recent one, elucidated by the Russian Laboratory of Theoretical Folkloristics at their 2014 conference 'Mechanisms of Cultural Memory: From Folk-lore to Media-lore'. Comparing it to the classic oral culture of folklore, they position media-lore as a 'third', screen-based mechanism for the transmission of cultural knowledge (the second was writing). Media-lore, they posit, in its immediacy and interactivity, has more in common with oral folklore than in does with the intermediate stage of written text. Where written text often intends to replace oral memory, media-lore shares with oral folk-lore the creation of cultural knowledge through dialogue. 'This is a paradoxical similarity since the technology for information transmission and storing in the 'screen age' is radically different from those of the oral era.' (Russian Laboratory of Theoretical Folkloristics 2014: online)

Mermaids feature in many articles in this issue, reflecting the numerous ways this creature of folklore has been adopted and adapted in contemporary media-lore. As Hayward has argued, the mermaid is able to 'manifest diverse and often disjunctive aspects' (2018: 3). She figures variously in the media texts discussed in this issue as a metaphor for conflict, a symbol for a micronation and a prop for a performance piece.

In 'Sung by an Indigenous Siren', Renes examines the use of the traditionally western mermaid in *Carpentaria*, an Indigenous novel. In this instance, the mermaid is both a

metaphor for and an embodiment of the conflict between antagonistic worlds, 'country' versus the 'capitalist paradigm of ruthless economic exploitation'. The mermaid is by no means the only media-logic aspect of this dense novel, which also links the Indigenous oral tradition to the contemporary world, deliberately crossing boundaries. Hayward's analysis of the symbolism and history of the micronation of Achzivland, established in 1972 in north western Israel, rotates around the use of a mermaid on the micronational flag. After discussing the symbol with regard to the vexed status of Achzivland on occupied Palestinian territory, the article compares the ideological operation of the micronational flag with the very different mermaid imagery produced by Palestinian artist Imad Abu Shtayyah. Mermaids also feature (in a supporting role) in the ceremonies described in Cashman's 'King Neptune, the Mermaids, and the Cruise Tourists'. The article focuses on how a long-established maritime tradition has undergone a transformation into a performative piece for cruise ship passengers in which gender roles and transgressions have been homogenised into a deckside entertainment. Mermen, with their emasculated lower halves, have occupied a less prominent cultural position than their female counterparts. This makes their use in the artwork for craft beer branding, as discussed in Mesker's 'Through an Ale Glass, Palely,' apposite, as craft breweries style themselves in contrast to the mainstream, hyper-masculinity of 'industrial' scale beer, preferring to identify with a more tongue-in-cheek and ironic masculinity.

Although they are not mermaids, the narf and the selkie in the films examined in Shalaby's essay 'Reworking the postmodern understanding of reality through fantasy' nevertheless fulfil a similar role to the mermaid, as 'fantasy' aquatic creatures who are able to offer the human protagonists a different and 'more enabling' understanding of themselves. In contrast to the previously discussed merman, there is no gender ambiguity in the aquatic creature in the film *The Shape of Water*. He is a specifically media-logic figure (Aquaman as introduced in *Creature from the Black Lagoon*) and Jilken and Johansson's of 'Aquatic Heterosexual Love and Wondrous Cliché Stereotypes' argue that he represents the development of a softer, albeit relentlessly heterosexual, approved heterogenic masculinity.

Another specifically media-logic creature features in Lee's 'The New Zombie Apocalypse and Social Crisis in South Korean Cinema', exploring the rise of the zombie horror film in South Korean cinema. The author describes how the zombie apocalypse has been adopted as a metaphor for crisis, disorder and fear; zombies also represent the loss of self (the concept of a 'bare life'). She further argues that the South Korean zombie films discussed are used to interrogate the country's 'the nation is a family' metaphor, as well as the conflict between 'pro-self' and 'pro-social' behaviour.

Taking another angle on contemporary media-lore, in 'Place, Visibility and Perception', Farinelli and Hayward explore how a location (the rocky outcrop Es Vedra, off the coast of Ibiza) has been represented as a concentration of a variety of traditional, New Age and media-logic discourses — including the ubiquitous mermaid and the 20th Century UFOs phenomenon. The authors argue that concentration of representations around the island create it as a media-logically resonant landmark.

In terms of material culture, the love-locks phenomenon described in Houlbrook's 'From

Popular Culture to Popular Custom, and Back Again' illustrates the creation of a modern form of folklore and the rapidity with which the love-lock as an artefact has spread globally and also created its own 'back history'. The genesis of the phenomenon was a 2006 Italian novel, and yet in a 2017 Hallmark film the tradition is asserted to have begun in 1997 and in a 2014 novel its origins are supposed to be 500 years old. The association between age and authenticity means that there is an imperative to create history. It is also notable that the locks are a mass-produced form of traditional technology redeployed for new purpose – which is in itself a tidy analogy for media-lore of the type discussed in this issue.

Overall, the contributions to this themed issue of *Coolabah* demonstrate both the rich and constantly refreshed corpus of contemporary media-lore and the variety of critical approaches that can illuminate its texts and infra-textual operation. As individual articles identify, media-loric figure and practices occur in a range of official, touristic, popular cultural and New Age contexts, making them key elements of 21st century public culture.

References

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