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*From Popular Culture to Popular Custom, and Back Again:
A Love-Lock's Tale*

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Abstract: Walk over a major bridge in a Western city and chances are you will come across at least one or two love-locks. These are padlocks inscribed with names or initials and attached to a public structure, typically by a couple in declaration of romantic commitment, who then proceed to throw the key into the river below. Some assemblages of these love tokens are modest; others number the thousands. This has become a truly global phenomenon, with over 400 love-lock assemblages catalogued across 62 countries in all continents bar Antarctica: *popular* custom in the true sense of the term. Although this custom was practised prior to the 21st century, with evidence of it in Serbia and Hungary in the 1900s,ⁱ it did not gain widespread popularity until the mid-2000s — sparked, this paper contends, by an Italian teenage romance novel.

This paper explores the transition from popular culture, defined here as mass-produced cultural products — including but not limited to television, film, literature and music — accessible to and consumed by the majority of a given society, to popular (or folk) custom. It also explores the reverse. As the love-lock custom gained popularity and familiarity, it became an established folk motif in films, television, and novels — from popular custom to popular culture — and this paper considers what these transitions demonstrate about the relationship, or interrelationship, between popular custom and popular culture.

Keywords: love-locks, popular culture, folk custom.

‘This is “The Lover’s Chain” ...’

In 2006 Italian novelist Federico Moccia published *Ho voglia di te (I Want You)*, the sequel to the highly popular *Tre Metri Sopra il Cielo (Three Metres Above Heaven)*. A

first-person narrated story of teenage angst and love, centred on Roman 'bad boy' Step's relationship with a girl called Gin, the novel's second half sees the pair driving through Rome in Step's brother's car. Gin tells him to stop near the Milvio Bridge.

Gin runs over the bridge and stops in the middle, in front of the third street lamp.

"Ok, this is the one."

"The one what?"

"The third street lamp. There's a legend about this bridge [...] Can you see this, surrounding the street lamp?"

"Yes, probably someone got something wrong while chaining up a scooter ..."

"Not at all, silly! This is 'the lover's chain'. You have to put a padlock on this chain, lock it and throw the key in the Tevere."

"And then?"

"You never break up."ⁱⁱ (Mocchia, 2006: 274–6)

Gin accuses Step of being 'scared of locking a padlock', to which he responds by retrieving a padlock from his brother's car.

I hang the padlock to the chain, lock it and pull out the key. I keep it in my hand for a moment, while I stare at Gin. She looks at me. She challenges me, smiles at me, raises an eyebrow. "So?"

I hold the key between my thumb and forefinger. I hang it loose for a while, suspended in the air, uncertain. Then suddenly I let it go. And it flies down, fast, rolls in the air and gets lost in the waters of the Tevere.

"You really did it." (ibid)

And thus the love-lock phenomenon was born.

In an interview with *USA Today*, Moccia admitted to placing a padlock on the third lamppost of the Ponte Milvio the night before *Ho voglia di te* was published, for the benefit of any curious readers who might visit the site to check if the love-lock custom was real. 'I thought only someone particularly engrossed by the story would have wanted to check,' Moccia is reported to have recalled in 2015, bemused by what happened next. 'I went there a week later and there were already 300 locks. They haven't stopped since' (Berton, 2015). It certainly did not take long for the custom to establish itself on the Ponte Milvio. One year later, an article in the 'Travel' section of the *Telegraph* reported that, following Moccia's novel, the lamppost on the Ponte Milvio has become:

... bedecked with hundreds of padlocks. Like characters in the book, lovers come here to add a chain inscribed with their names — and then throw the key into the river. But hurry if you want to follow suit. The weight of the locks is bending the post, and there are now calls for the custom to be banned. (Owen, 2007)

It is unsurprising that such quantities of people visited the site from the book. It was a remarkably successful novel, with a million copies sold in Italy alone, and translations also proving popular; 600,000 copies were sold in Spain, for example.ⁱⁱⁱ Moccia's work

has been published in 15 languages worldwide, with an English translation planned for 2021.^{iv} Films followed the books, with *Ho voglia di te*, directed by Luis Prieto, hitting the screens in Italy in 2007 (a Spanish version, *Tengo ganas de ti*, was released in 2012). The film is evidence of the love-lock custom on the Ponte Milvio, for the scene with Step and Gin on the bridge features the assemblage. So in the short amount of time between the book's publication in February 2006 and the release of the film in March 2007, the love-lock lamppost had become an established feature.

Connected to the film was singer-songwriter Tiziano Ferro's *Ti scatterò una foto [I will take a photo of you]*. The lyrics of this love song speak of 'memory', 'always', 'remember[ing] forever', and the fear of being forgotten. The music video for this featured Ferro standing on the Ponte Milvio with actress Laura Chiatti, who played Gin in *Ho voglia di te*. Throughout the video, which is regularly interspersed with shots of the bridge's assemblage, both Ferro and Chiatti melancholically touch and study the love-locks. The song was released in February 2007 and was in the Italian music charts for 20 weeks.^v The popularity of the novel, films and song has been dubbed the 'Moccia phenomenon' in popular media, and the love-lock custom — sprung from this popularity in such a short space of time — was soon being dubbed the same.

From Popular Culture to Popular Custom

This conversion from popular culture to popular custom is not uncommon. Literature, film and television are well-known travel inducements, attracting fans to the sites that feature in the fiction. Fans of *The Lord of the Rings* visit New Zealand in their search for Middle Earth; for the *Twilight Saga* they travel to Forks (Washington) and Volterra (Tuscany); for *Gladiator*, the Roman Coliseum (Buchmann, Moore & Fisher, 2010; Lexhagen, Larson & Lundberg, 2013; Frost, 2006). Similar to the Moccia phenomenon is what Amy Sargent terms the 'Darcy Effect', which saw immense increases in visits to historic homes following the hugely successful 1995 BBC adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* (Sargent, 1998: 177–86). Visitor numbers at the National Trust property of Lyme Park — BBC's Pemberley of Colin Firth's wet-shirt-scene fame — rose from 32,000 to 91,000 the year of the miniseries' release (Orr, 2018: 248).

What compels such visits? Ashley Orr writes that fans seek connections with fictional 'characters through a sense of shared geographical, if not temporal, space' and such trips 'offer the possibility of inhabiting a beloved narrative' (ibid: 247–8). This form of visit, known as literary tourism and film tourism, can sometimes offer more than habitation in a narrative; it can offer the opportunity for imaginative and embodied play through the re-enactment of character actions. This is what is happening when, as Nick Couldry writes, visitors to the Manchester set of British soap opera *Coronation Street* 'pretend for a moment they live on the Street, posing with door knocker in hand or calling upstairs to a Street character' (Couldry, 1998: 97).

This is also what is happening in Transylvania when fans of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* retrace the journey made by the character Jonathan Harker, and when they pay a fee to lie in — and rise dramatically from — a coffin in the basement of Hotel Castle Dracula

(Light, 2009: 248–50). And this is what is happening in London Kings Cross train station, when fans of *Harry Potter* queue up at the staged ‘Platform 9¾’, don a Hogwarts scarf, grasp hold of the handlebars of a half-disappeared luggage trolley, and pose for photographs (Iwashita, 2006: 66). To use a folkloric term, these are examples of ostensive action. Folklorists Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi borrowed the word ‘ostension’ (from the Latin *ostendere*, ‘to show’) from semiotics to make sense of this relationship between folklore and popular culture. Communication through ostension is, they explained, ‘essentially the showing of actions’; the physical enactment of folk narrative and legend (1983: 7–8). And like folk narratives and legends, popular culture, Chieko Iwashita observes, ‘is very good at turning people’s dreams and curiosity into action’ (2006: 70).

Such re-enactments even precipitate adaptations of belief systems and lifestyles. For example, Helen Berger and Douglas Ezzy explore how modern witchcraft has been impacted by popular culture, with the number of teen witchcraft practitioners seeing a significant increase during the 1990s. This was, Berger and Ezzy argue, accelerated or even triggered by the popular 1996 film *The Craft*, which centred on a group of teenage witches, and television shows *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (which ran 1996–2003) and *Charmed* (1998–2006) (2007: 32). The same process is evident in what Markus Davidsen identifies as ‘fiction-based religions’, such as those based on *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* — while the ‘Jedi Census Phenomenon’, which in 2001 saw more than 500,000 people claim ‘Jedi’ as their religion, was largely a prank, there are groups who earnestly identify themselves as Jedi Knights (2013: 378–95).

Often, however, re-enactments are transient, consisting of a single action that lasts no longer than a few moments. They also often, like Moccia’s love-locks, have a romantic element. Visitors to the Casa di Julietta in Verona, for instance, queue for their brief moment on ‘Juliet’s balcony’ to re-enact that most famous of love scenes: ‘Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?’ Likewise, Kim explores couples’ fan play at sites from South Korean television show *Winter Sonata*, where they re-enact romantic scenes of bicycle rides through a specific redwood-lined road, as the show’s characters did before them. ‘By this performance,’ Kim writes, ‘it is presumed that the tourists would then become true lovers in their own context and love story’ (2010: 67). These romantic re-enactments, while transient, can sometimes leave tangible traces, physically altering the landscapes and creating something real that only previously existed in fiction. Love-locks are an example of this; imaginative play forms a folk assemblage and popular culture begets a popular custom (Coffey, 2017).

This is the process that popularised the love-lock custom in Italy. Fans of Moccia’s novels and the subsequent films re-enacted the locking of a padlock on the Ponte Milvio, creating a folk custom by drawing a fictional action into reality. Fans who could not visit Rome initiated the custom elsewhere, such as Venice’s Rialto bridge, forming further folk assemblages and cementing the custom as a ritual declaration of romantic commitment. And so, by the 2000s, love-locks had become an established feature in some European cities. What followed was a rapid and geographically unbounded growth. However, it was spurred less by Moccia’s fanbase and more by the masses of tourists who were now encountering these tangible traces of the custom left on the landscape.

The many articles which describe the custom in Italy as a symptom of the ‘Moccia phenomenon’ go on to observe that by the late 2000s tourists had begun imitating the local fans by adding their own love-locks. One written in 2007 for *The New York Times* notes, ‘tossing a key off Ponte Milvio, some Italians complain, may soon be as touristy as flipping a coin into the Trevi Fountain’ and ‘Some young Roman said that ... the ritual had lost its appeal and gotten touristy’ (Fisher, 2007). Two years later, in Cologne, the custom is described as one practised by local lovers, but the author of the article observes that ‘The tokens have also become an attraction for tourists, who stop to take a closer look at the messages inscribed on them’.^{vi} From this point on, the myriad newspaper and magazine articles which refer to the love-lock custom describe it as a tourist practice — in many cases actually having been initiated by tourists.

It is no coincidence that many of the world’s tourist attractions also feature love-locks: New York’s Brooklyn Bridge, Paris’s Pont des Arts, Florence’s Ponte Vecchio, Sydney’s Harbour Bridge, Prague’s Charles Bridge, Seoul’s Namsan Tower. Tourists brought the custom to these sites and took them onwards from there, seeing them while on one holiday (or encountering them less directly — see below) and then disseminating the practice on their next trip or back home. ‘The idea of hanging locks originated from local tourists a few years ago who saw the same thing at Tokyo Tower’, wrote Park Ji-yun in her article on love-locks on Seoul Tower (2008). Even in the more obscure locations, once enough locks are added to a structure, that structure becomes culturally and aesthetically interesting, consequently attracting tourists. Love-lock assemblages thus became something more than features of tourist attractions; they became tourist attractions in and of themselves.

From Popular Custom to Popular Culture

Since Federico Moccia’s use of love-locks in *Ho voglia di te*, the custom has appeared in myriad pieces of fiction, from Hollywood to Hallmark, from international drama to Korean melodrama, from teen thriller books to children’s superhero cartoons. In some examples, love-locks act as incidental backdrop. In others, they are drawn on to communicate a message or materialise a sentiment; in yet others, they are integral to the plot itself. However, it is not sufficient simply to ‘motif-spot’, as Koven disparagingly phrases it; that is, to catalogue instances and thus demonstrate the frequency with which love-locks appear in popular culture (2003: 190). Alan Dundes stressed in the 1960s that folklorists need to do more than simply identify folk motifs (1965: 136–43). Interpretation and analysis are needed to understand how and why folklore and popular culture converge, and how they structure, adapt to, and influence each other. The remainder of this paper therefore aims to analyse the various uses of the love-lock as folk motif in popular culture in order to better understand how the love-lock custom is perceived, used and affected by mass media.

As we will see below, love-locks are particularly popular backdrop material for films and television series set in Paris. This use of love-locks demonstrates two important things. First, they fit one of Priscilla Denby’s categories of folklore in the mass media — ‘folklore as an aside’, in particular that which is ‘used consciously for effects’ (1971:

118). The custom of love-locking is incidental within the plot, not directly engaged with, but the love-locks are part of the *mise-en-scène*,^{vii} consciously chosen to form part of the setting — both for decorative purposes, to make the backdrop more visually interesting, and to locate the scenes within central, popular and romantic locations within Paris. This leads to the second point: love-locks are used in these scenes because, being so popular in Paris, they have become synonymous with the French capital. Therefore, just as stock shots of the Eiffel Tower, Notre-Dame and Sacré-Cœur are employed excessively, almost uniformly, in visual media to set the scene in Paris, now so too are love-lock bridges.

In Roger Michell's 2013 film *Le Week-End*, British actors Jim Broadbent and Lindsay Duncan play husband and wife Nick and Meg, visiting Paris to celebrate their 30th wedding anniversary. Taglines for the film included 'Nick & Meg are returning to Paris for a second honeymoon ... and a last chance' and 'A story about reigniting the spark in the City of Light'. The spark is not necessarily reignited, but at the end of a dissatisfying trip, the long-time marrieds find some common ground and towards the end of the film, a 23-second scene has them talking and laughing on a love-lock bridge. There is no discussion or engagement with the love-locks, but part of the scene has the characters as backdrop and the locks in the foreground.

Parisian love-locks also feature briefly in a 2013 Chanel Coco Mademoiselle advertisement, in which Keira Knightley drives a speedboat down the Seine, passing an admirer — Russian actor Danila Valerievich Kozlovsky — as he walks across a heavily love-locked Pont des Arts, to the theme song of 'She's Not There'. Again, the love-locks are not engaged with, but act as backdrop. Likewise in 2018, the Paris love-locks made a cameo appearance in an episode of French superhero cartoon *Miraculous: Tales of Ladybug and Cat Noir*, entitled 'Glaciator'. They feature as backdrop in a scene featuring a villainous ice-cream vendor, and again are not commented on or looked at by the characters.^{viii}

The use of love-locks as backdrop has also occurred in Seoul, where the vast assemblage of love-locks on Namsan Tower (or N Seoul Tower) feature as the romantic backdrop of many Korean dramas (more details below). They have also been similarly used, to a lesser extent, in the UK. For example, the love-locks on Ha'penny Bridge in Dublin featured in a 2012 episode of British soap opera *Hollyoaks*, in which the characters Ste and Brendan are reunited and declare their love for each other on the bridge itself.^{ix} Likewise in *Coronation Street*, when character Phelan travels to Liverpool's Albert Docks, the love-locks adorning the chain-link fences act as backdrop, and the extent of engagement with them is Phelan briefly and absently looking down at the locks before he walks away.^x For Liverpool, Dublin, and Seoul, as well as Paris, the love-lock assemblage has entered the scene-setting corpus of visual media. In many other cases, however, love-locks are used as more than scenery, but act as symbolic objects and plot devices.

The Love-Lock as Folk Motif

Objects are a language that popular culture is fluent in. Films and television in particular know how to use material culture effectively; they know how to squeeze the symbolism

out of an object (Bordwell et al, 2017: 118). Obviously, the selection of props is culturally dependent, but there are some objects that boast near universal symbolic resonance. The ring is one such object, utilised in abundance in film, television, and literature to symbolise romantic commitment, to hold a mirror up to a couple's relationship (and economic) status, and to foreshadow future events. Hidden in a pocket or sock drawer a ring indicates future plans; deposited in a champagne flute, imminent proposal; slipped on a finger, engagement or marriage; too small for the finger, bad luck; removed from a finger, thrown away or given back, the end of a relationship; and accidentally lost or broken, future problems or tragedy. The ring is without a doubt the most commonly used material symbol of love within popular culture, but it is not the only one. Love-locks have entered the arena. They have become, like the ring, 'objects of endearment', to use a term coined by Victor Margolin, who asserts that love, in its myriad forms, can be 'played out through ... objects' identities both as possessions and as props in the performative enactments of social rituals' (2014: 16).

The love-lock scene in Moccia's *Ho voglia di te* was a short one, occupying only two pages in the book and less than two minutes in the film, but the love story became so synonymous with the custom that later editions of the novel featured only an image of the love-lock on the front cover. Likewise, the whole of Tiziano Ferro's 2007 music video for *Ti scatterò una foto*, which accompanied the film, centred on the bridge and its love-lock assemblage. This was because the love-lock works so well as a folk motif – Bordwell et al. note that when props enter the narrative action, they can 'weave through a film to create motifs' (2017: 188) — no doubt due to the universality of its symbolism (Maiwald, 2016: np). Because this small and inexpensive object can, like the ring, so readily allegorise love, it has been employed extensively within popular culture.

In 2017, Hallmark released the made-for-TV film *Love Locks*, which, unsurprisingly, centred on the custom. Directed by Martin Wood and starring American actors (and real-life husband-and-wife) Jerry O'Connell as Jack and Rebecca Romijn as Lindsey, the film opens with the couple cycling through Paris. Cue the typical shots of the Eiffel Tower and the Louvre, and of course they end on the Pont des Arts. They are soon to part ways, with Lindsey returning to the US, so she has brought a love-lock to attach to the bridge.

Lindsey: We'll lock it on the bridge and our love will last forever.

Jack: Forever?

Lindsey: Forever. [*They write their names onto the lock*]

Jack: OK. With this lock I thee —

What follows is a clumsy fumble and they accidentally drop the lock into the Seine; the camera follows it to the bottom of the riverbed. They accuse each other of dropping it and the scene ends with the unspoken assumption that this did not bode well for their relationship. The next scene takes us to New York, twenty years later, Jack and Lindsey not having seen each other since Paris. Lindsey has since married and divorced, and is returning to Paris with her teenage daughter, where she inevitably reunites with Jack.

Love-locks feature throughout the entire film. The daughter, Alexa, wants to include the love-locks in their sightseeing tour, but Lindsey is reluctant: 'It's just a bridge. With locks', to which Alexa responds, 'Yeah but those locks are people pledging their love for

each other'. Reference is made to the council removing the locks, and this is used to explore the custom through other couples' eyes. Side-character Kathryn, a widow, wants to find the lock on Pont Neuf she and her late husband locked there some years before, before it is removed by the council; her new love interest has retrieved the lock for her by the end of the film. In this specific storyline, the love-lock acts as mnemonic device, recalling a past relationship. While Alexa is given a love-lock by her new love interest and she declares not to care if the council removes it: 'It's still ours'. The film ends with Lindsey and Jack back on the bridge, having rekindled their romance. This time they have brought extra love-locks, just in case.

This film is interesting on a number of levels. It reveals something of the love-lock's real-world status; the daughter's eagerness to see the love-locks indicates that they have become tourist attractions in and of themselves. It reveals how the love-lock has become a strong and familiar enough folk motif to act as the central theme of an entire film. It reveals how the love-lock can be variously used as a plot device; while it brings some couples together throughout the film, it foreshadows the main characters' (temporarily) doomed romance. A failed love-lock here symbolises a failed relationship. The love-locks are also used as a character-building device, for instance demonstrating the contrasts between the perspectives of Lindsey, characterised as middle-aged and cynical, and Alexa, young and idealistic. Finally, it tells us something about the tendency to project age onto this custom. According to this film, love-locks were being attached to the Pont des Arts since 1997, over ten years before they were in reality. This is frequently the case with folk customs, antiquity often being equated with authenticity and therefore fabricated, knowingly or unknowingly, for commercial reasons.

Customs feel more firmly established if bestowed with a sense of age. Age 'lends it status' (Lowenthal, 1985: 265).^{xi} As Sefryn Penrose observes, 'the older something becomes the more important it tends to be thought' (2007: 13). This applies to customs, which appear to be viewed by many as only interesting insofar as they are seasoned, survivals from an earlier time. Alessandro Testa demonstrates this in his ethnographic exploration of carnivals in Europe today, which are given (largely false) historical roots: 'one can explain the emic usage of adjectives like 'very ancient', 'antique', 'pagan', or even 'prehistoric': the equation at work is that the more remote the evoked past is, the more 'authentic' (2017: 124).

An even greater exaggeration of antiquity is given in A. Scott's 2014 independently published novel *The Cornuta Curse*, which is the first in the *Love Locks* trilogy. The story follows Mara, an Australian of Italian heritage, who learns that the women in her family are cursed in love, following her ancestors' failure to throw the key into the sea when they attached a love-lock on the Via Dell'Amore (a real place, today heavily adorned with love-locks) on the Cinque Terre in 1545. According to her grandmother, 500 years ago 'Lovers would go up there with a padlock, and put their initials on it, and lock it before throwing the key into the sea. That way, the love would last forever'. However, 'by not throwing the key into the sea, [Mara's ancestors, Adriana and Tomolsino] had failed to complete the pact so had secured their love but without the "forever" part ... As a result, Adriana was doomed to suffer Tomolsino's infidelity, as we were, one generation after the next, to be betrayed by our partners' (Scott, 2014: 14–15).

Mara's plan when she travels to the Cinque Terre — 'find lock, unlock lock, relock lock, throw the dang key into the sea and live happily ever after' (53) — is thwarted by the sheer number of locks on the Via Dell'Amore and the various factions of local inhabitants who wish to see her fail. When she does finally succeed in finding the lock, her observation that 'Its size mocked its importance' (243) is applicable also to its importance within the plot itself. As with the film *Love Locks*, the small object of the padlock is deemed of enough cultural significance and symbolism to play not only the central plot device but the theme holding the novel together.

Another projection of (less unrealistic) age is evident in US television series *Homeland*, which sees Marine Sergeant Nicholas Brody reunited with his family after being missing in action since 2003. In an episode that aired in 2011, Brody takes his daughter Dana to see a love-lock assemblage on a chain-link fence in some unnamed, nondescript woods in Virginia. When his daughter asks what they are, Brody responds 'historical artefacts', and explains that he and his wife attached a love-lock there (at some point that must pre-date 2003, and that therefore pre-dates the spread of the custom). 'Each padlock put here by a couple who thought they'd stay together forever,' muses Brody, 'I wonder how many did. Not many, I bet'. When Dana asks why he brought her to see them, he explains 'I'm kind of struggling for things to hold onto'. In this example, the love-lock represents memory and the past, and is used to demonstrate Brody's struggle in the present.^{xii}

Love-locks have been employed in various ways over a number of years in the Australian soap opera *Neighbours*. The first episode to feature a love-lock storyline aired on 13 February 2014 (the day before Valentine's Day) and involved character Callum Jones creating a love-lock assemblage on the chain-link fences along the fictional Lassiter's Lake. He pitched his idea: 'Couples will be brought here to Lovers Lake to put a lock on this bridge, just like in Paris ... And then afterwards, they'll drop lots of money at local business'. Throughout the following few episodes, the romantic status of several of the show's couples is reflected in their responses to the love-locks. Young love is cemented through the locking of a lock, secret lovers consider using the custom to make their relationship public, while a marriage is shown to be struggling when a husband is too busy to participate in the custom.^{xiii} Love-locks appear again in June 2014 as a mnemonic device, with one character encountering the lock she had attached on Valentine's Day; again in February 2016, when another character protests against the local council's plans to remove them; and again in October 2017 when one of the locks is removed to signify the end of a relationship.^{xiv}

The love-lock is not always used romantically within popular culture, again demonstrating its adaptability. In the 2013 Hollywood film *Now You See Me*, which centres on a mysterious organisation of magicians, character Alma Dray of Interpol describes the custom as one of magic, wishes, and secrets:

There is a place in Paris, Pont des Arts. Sometimes in the mornings I sit on a bench there and I watch the people make a wish and lock it in a lock on the bridge then throw the key into the Seine. All day they do this. Mothers, lovers, old men. Watching the keys sink into the water and their secret is locked away forever. For real and at the same time magical.

In the final scene of the film, Alma is on the Pont des Arts with FBI agent Dylan Rhodes (who has revealed himself to be a member of the secret organisation). He asks Alma to keep the secret of his identity and has brought a padlock: 'One more secret to lock away'. They lock it and throw the key into the Seine; the camera follows it beneath the water to rest on the riverbed, amidst hundreds of keys.

The Effects of Popular Culture

The love-lock custom has impacted popular culture by providing a familiar and adaptable motif easily employed to symbolise romance and memory, and to hold a mirror up to the status of people's relationships: young love, secret love, long-lost love, rekindled love. However, as was demonstrated by the 'Moccia phenomenon', the love-lock custom has also been impacted *by* popular culture. Gin and Step attached a love-lock in *Ho voglia di te* so Italian teenagers began imitating the practice in a form of embodied play. We witness the same process following the appearance of the custom in other examples of mass media, where audiences become aware of the custom through their exposure to it on the screen or in the pages of a novel, and then perhaps even visit the specific love-lock assemblage referenced.

It has been suggested that this process is behind the popularity of the Namsan Tower love-locks, Seoul. Going to the top of the tower has become the stereotypical Korean date as shown in Korean dramas (known popularly as K-Drama) and it is often accompanied by the locking of a love-lock. Appearing in such dramas as *Boys Over Flowers*, *Rooftop Prince* and *My Love from the Star*, it is unsurprising that the site features in many 'K-Drama' sightseeing itineraries.^{xv} However, references to the site are not limited to K-Drama. An article in *Korea Times* identifies the Namsan Tower's love-locks' appearance in Korean reality television programme *We've Got Married* in 2008 as another factor behind its popularity (Ji-yun, 2008). They also feature in Paula Stokes's 2017 young adult thriller *Ferocious*, in which protagonist Winter and love interest Jesse climb to the top of the tower on their first date and discuss the locks, observing that there are similar assemblages in the US. 'It's a cool gesture, but I never really understood,' Jesse admits. 'I feel like love is the kind of thing you have to nurture and care for. You can't just lock it up in some faraway place if you want it to last' (268–9).

This process of popular cultural references increasing the number of participants in the custom has occurred elsewhere, albeit to a lesser extent. The *Hollyoaks* scene, described above, which features two characters declaring their love on the Ha'penny Bridge, Dublin, is believed to have motivated fans to visit the bridge and attach love-locks themselves.^{xvi} One commenter on travel review website *TripAdvisor* responded to a complaint about the love-locks on Ha'penny Bridge by noting 'those locks could be something attracting tourists to Dublin [—] ever since the same bridge was seen in [H]ollyoaks with [S]te and Brendan!'. While another person responded to an online *The Journal* article on the love-locks by writing 'Hollyoaks, the TV show, has a lot to answer for'. Following the episode in 2012, photographs circulated on the internet of a love-lock with the two characters' names on, despite the fact that no scene aired showing the pair

lock one.^{xvii} This was possibly the result of a scene filmed but cut from the show; it may also have been the deposit of a fan, partaking in embodied play.

Another love-lock deposited in direct connection to a television show was one locked during the 100th episode of American sitcom *Parks and Recreation*, when the central character Leslie takes a romantic trip to Paris with husband Ben. One of the final scenes of the 2014 episode shows them locking a love-lock on Pont Neuf. Sean O'Neill, writing for entertainment website *AV News*, observed that 'Fans have since made their own pilgrimages to seek out the lock and take their pictures with it, and it was all incredibly sweet and sentimental and a shared experience until some selfish jerkface cut the fence and stole the lock for themselves' (2014). Actor Adam Scott, who played Ben, shared this news on 5 February 2014 on social media platform *Twitter*, with the simple message 'This is shitty'.^{xviii}

That the folk custom of love-locking is being transmitted to a wide audience and consequently perpetuated through popular culture is not surprising. As early as 1946, folklorist Stith Thompson was declaring cinema as 'perhaps the most successful of all mediums for the presentation of the fairy tale' (1977: 461). Making particular reference to Disney's 1937 *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, Thompson noted the animated cartoon's unprecedented scope for constructing and therefore communicating the creatures and characters of the folk imagination. Juliette Wood made a similar assertion about fairy beliefs and film: 'contemporary audiences are more likely to be exposed to folk legend and belief in the context of mass media than by any other means' and so, she concluded, traditions 'are transmitted through popular culture' (2006: 281). Leonard Primiano made the same remarks regarding television: 'The nature of television is that it expresses individuals' views while simultaneously influencing them. Television media treatment may often trivialize and sensationalize personal experiences of the supernatural, but it can also inspire and inform them' (2001: 57). And thus has popular culture inspired and informed the love-lock custom.

Conclusion

When Moccia used the love-lock custom to make a statement about the romantic commitment between his two main characters, he created a folk motif: a symbolic element within the narrative that draws on a folkloric custom. Having become an established 'object of endearment', one that so succinctly allegorises love, the love-lock's popularity as a folk motif grew. It has appeared in numerous films, television shows, and pieces of literature, demonstrating the ease with which folkloric customs and popular culture converge, whether the love-locks act as incidental backdrop, are drawn on to communicate a message or materialise a sentiment, or are integral to the plot. Through a consideration of how the love-lock custom and consequent assemblages are used in mass media, a better insight has been gained into how they are perceived: as familiar landmarks, as romantic settings, and as a ritual of universal but also adaptable symbolism.

This exploration into the love-lock as mass-mediated ostension has also illustrated how popular culture has impacted the custom. First, transmission: through exposure to it on

the screen or on the page, audiences become familiar with the symbolism of love-locking and with the assemblages as landmarks. And vice versa, the more familiar the audiences become, the more this motif is used. And second, dissemination: familiarity leads to the perpetuation of the custom, with fans imitating the practice through embodied play. These various strands all serve to demonstrate how interrelated popular custom and popular culture can be. The custom was borne from popular culture, perpetuated and shaped by it, just as popular culture has been created for and coloured by the custom.

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Endnotes

- ⁱ For a detailed discussion of the history of this custom, see Houlbrook, C (forthcoming).
- ⁱⁱ Translation from Italian by Francesca Benetti, with much appreciation.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Personal communication, Maria Cardona Serra, Pontas Literary Agency, 23 November 2018.
- ^{iv} Pontas Literary Agency (2018) 'Grand Central Publishing to publish the #1 Italian bestselling author Federico Moccia' <https://www.pontas-agency.com/grand-central-publishing-to-publish-the-1-italian-bestselling-author-federico-moccia/> [accessed 23 November 2018]
- ^v Italian Charts. *Tiziano Ferro – I Scattered A Photo (Song)*. https://translate.googleusercontent.com/translate_c?depth=1&hl=en&prev=search&rurl=translate.google.com&sl=it&sp=nmt4&u=https://italiancharts.com/showitem.asp%3Finterpret%3DTiziano%2BFerro%26titel%3DTi%2Bscatter%25F2%2Buna%2Bfoto%26cat%3Ds&xid=17259,15700021,15700124,15700149,15700186,15700190,15700201,15700214&usg=ALkJrhgOanCIZ_Bzj8r1t2IfdWY81svJtA [accessed 22 November 2018]
- ^{vi} 'Cologne Gets a Lock on Love' *DW*, 2 February 2009 <https://www.dw.com/en/cologne-gets-a-lock-on-love/a-4008316> [accessed 26 July 2018]
- ^{vii} The *mise-en-scène* is defined by John Gibbs as 'the contents of the frame and the way that they are organised' (Gibbs, 2012: 5).
- ^{viii} 'Glaciator', *Miraculous: Tales of Ladybug and Cat Noir*. Season 2, Episode 9. First aired 14 January 2018.
- ^{ix} *Hollyoaks*, 19 December 2012.
- ^x *Coronation Street*, Episode 9195, 26 June 2017.
- ^{xi} See also Holtorf and Schadla-Hall, writing of 'age-value' (Holtorf & Schadla-Hall, 1999: 232).
- ^{xii} 'Clean Skin', *Homeland*, Season 1, Episode 3.
- ^{xiii} *Neighbours*, Episodes 6819, 6820, 6823.
- ^{xiv} *Neighbours*, Episodes 7292, 7710, 7714, 7717.
- ^{xv} Korean Dramaland. 2018. Namsan Tower AKA Seoul Tower: <https://koreandramaland.com/listings/namsan-tower-aka-n-seoul-tower/> [accessed 1 December 2018]; Adrian. 2016. Locks of Love: Why N Seoul Tower Is Romantic. *HELLOKPOP*, January 3, 2016: <https://www.hellokpop.com/korea-joa/locks-of-love-why-n-seoul-tower-is-romantic/> [accessed 1 December 2018]
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- ^{xvii} Emmett Fans. 2014: [http://emmettfans.tumblr.com/post/47703848840/here-is-the-ste-and-brendan-love-lock-from;BrendanBrady\(EmmettJ.Scanlan\)FanThread!DigitalSpy](http://emmettfans.tumblr.com/post/47703848840/here-is-the-ste-and-brendan-love-lock-from;BrendanBrady(EmmettJ.Scanlan)FanThread!DigitalSpy)

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^{xviii} *Parks and Recreation*, 2014, Season 6, Episode 10.