All representation is interpretation. When the materials of folklore feature in the media, they are by definition ‘mediated.’ In the first place, they are more often in the form of indirect than direct representation: the event takes second place to the commentary. In most cases, text is divorced from context, or rather harnessed to a new context in which all has been sacrificed to continuity and ‘flow’. In a discussion of advertising, Judith Williamson has shown how this process of re-contextualising, ‘speaking for’ rather than ‘speaking by’, is one which is saturated with ideology (Williamson 1978: 40). It is the process which Roland Barthes (1973) called ‘mythmaking’, where the exotic, the subversive and the particular are re-constituted into a form where they can be conveniently located in relation to supposed standards of what is ‘normal’ or ‘natural’, and integrated into a grand narrative of progress.

This became evident during the folk song revival in England at the beginning of the twentieth century, when cheap reprints of a careful selection of folk songs were adopted in schools to propagate a certain concept of ‘Englishness’ that derived from the maypole, going to the fair and a pastoral sense of ‘old England’. The durability of this image was seen when the then Prime Minister John Major revived it in the 1990s in a partly-urbanised form. England is, he said, still ‘the country of long shadows on county [cricket] grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and [football] pools fillers and - as George Orwell said – “old maids cycling to Holy Communion through the morning mist”’ (quoted in Kumar 2003: 27).

When traditional songs were recorded and broadcast on the radio and TV, they were expected to conform to this absurdly anachronistic stereotype. Since they were to be associated with a rural past, studios were adapted accordingly: in one 1960 series the presenters sat on bales of straw. Further radical changes were made. Narrative songs were drastically shortened. In recording the English ballad ‘Scarborough Fair’, a version of ‘The Elfin Knight’ (Child 2), Paul Simon truncated the triadic structure of the verses and reintroduced the opening stanza at the end, making nonsense of the narrative development. After forty years this is still the bestselling recording of a traditional ballad in English.

This doctoring of texts for the recording market was always had a ready market and a large audience on radio and TV, songs were altered to make them fulfil market expectations and in particular to conform to expected norms of Irishness. In a process of mediation that goes back to the mass production of ‘parlour songs’ in the nineteenth century, a handful of Irish words repeatedly inserted into English texts with anglicised spelling. At the same time the practice of using internal rhymes was greatly exaggerated. Thus the stereotyped line

Down a boreen green came a sweet colleen
[A sweet girl came down a green path]

was added to the song ‘Star of the County Down’ to make it more ‘Irish’ (O Boyle 1979: 21).

In Scotland, a similar reduction of songs occurred in the 1950s. The Scottish revival was far more broad-based and democratic than the English one, based on People’s Festivals and an extremely wide cross-section of Scottish society, including a central role for migrant workers, coal miners and the Roma (gypsies). The importance of this singing tradition to a broad recognition of Scottish cultural values meant that the mass media soon became involved. However, this was often done in a perfunctory way which showed a greater preoccupation with production flow than with the integrity of the songs. It was assumed that the attention span of listeners was only a few minutes. BBC Scotland requested performers of ‘The Earl of Erroll’, a ballad of marital discord, to reduce its length from 11 stanzas, to three for the purposes of a radio programme (J. Porter 1995: 294). The same happened to Scotland’s leading traditional singer Jeannie Robertson, who was asked to cut the length of her compelling murder ballad ‘My Son David’ before singing it on television. This had a permanent effect on her interpretation of the song (J. Porter and Gower 1995: 94).

The effect of these interventions by the new media was to divorce these songs from their performing context of gender politics and ritual and open them up to the ideology of consumption.

Folk narratives are frequently ‘quoted’ in film plots: one might say it is the homage vice plays to virtue. Sometimes merely the title is left to offer a gratuitous association with a story that has a history long predating the film industry. The sentimental baseball film ‘Bang the Drum Slowly’ (1973) and the Western ‘Streets of Laredo’ (1949) appropriated in their titles a song about a hero who is variously described as a logger, a sailor or a ‘rake’ who has been ‘cut down in his prime. The song is rooted in African-American, Canadian, Texan and Irish

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traditions, and known from at least the eighteenth century, but the films appropriated it to a single simplified setting. In ‘Across the Wide Missouri’ (dir. William Wellman, 1951), also a Western, the title attempts to capture the aura of the African-American sea shanty that celebrates the ‘Indian maiden’ Shenandoah. The very word ‘glamour’, which has come to evoke the charismatic quality of Hollywood and Bollywood stars alike, is derived from a Scottish dialect word describing the casting of a magic spell, and appears as such in the most widely-distributed of all Scottish folk songs, ‘The Gypsy Laddie’ (Child 200):

As soon as they saw her weel-far’d face,
They cast their glamourie owre her.
(Sargent and Kittredge 1932: 484)

As these examples suggest, the residual aura of songs half-remembered from childhood or local communities has been harnessed for purely commercial projects. By the process known as ‘articulation’, they are read against the grain of the narrative to reinforce, for example, racial stereotypes (‘Shenandoah’) or purely bourgeois notions of marriage and the family. This is most noticeable in appropriations of the traditional tale known as ‘Young Bechan’ (Child 53), where a previously betrothed woman turns up at a wedding feast to claim her husband. This plot is the basis of several Hollywood films: Move Over Darling (1963), My Favourite Wife (1940), Our Wife (1941) Three for the Show (1955) and Too Many Husbands (1940). The last two were both based on W. Somerset Maugham’s play ‘Home and Beauty’.

‘Tam Lin’ (Child 39), a song of abduction to the otherworld, has been called ‘by far the most popular ballad for transformation and retelling’ in the modern media because of its detailed evocation of medieval magic and its independent and active heroine (Ringel 1997: 200). A film entitled variously ‘The Ballad of Tam-Lin’ and ‘The Devil’s Widow’ (dir. Roddy McDowall, 1971) was an attempt, in name alone, to harness the song to a supernatural horror tale of the ‘beautiful people’ frequenting British and American campuses in the 1960s. Perhaps because of its matter-of-fact attitude to the supernatural, this ballad has provided the substance (and the illusion) for pop groups, films, video games and above all New Age novels, which not only favour happy supernatural horror tale of the ‘beautiful people’ frequenting British and American campuses in the 1960s. Perhaps because of its matter-of-fact attitude to the supernatural, this ballad has provided the substance (and the illusion) for pop groups, films, video games and above all New Age novels, which not only favour happy endings like that of ‘Tam Lin’ but also privilege the pagan over the Christian.

M.J. C. Hodgart (1950: 27-8) pointed out the similarities between the montage techniques of Sergei Eisenstein and the selection and juxtaposition of rapid flashes of narrative in the traditional ballad. Directors were alert to this even before Eisenstein: the melodramatic ‘Maria Marten, or Murder in the Red Barn’, which sold millions of copies as a London street ballad in the nineteenth century, was successfully adapted several times to the silent film format before receiving feature length treatment with a soundtrack (dir. George King, 1935). At the same time, there is a recognition that the value systems of representatives of the folk tradition are often at odds with those of a capitalist enterprise like a film company. This was particularly true of Hollywood in the 1950s. The presence of the singer (and folk song collector) A. L. Lloyd as a one-eyed shantyman in John Huston’s film of Moby Dick (1956) has the effect of making the rest of the film appear factitious.

The dislocation is also evident in the way folk songs became a metalinguage to evade the strict censorship that prevailed under the Hays code at the time: in the filmed version of Robert Anderson’s play Tea and Sympathy (dir. Vincente Minnelli, 1956), the American folk song revival becomes a clandestine metaphor for homosexuality. This makes the dialogue at times quite obscure, as when a father exhales of his sensitive teenage son: ‘I have to tell my friends I don’t know what he’s going to be when he grows up. I just can’t tell them he’s going to be a folk singer’. Traditional singing, with its endorsement of communal over national values, as well as its more recent association with ‘protest songs’, was being constructed as oppositional to the ‘American way of life’ in the same way as homosexuality and Communism. They were all part of the ‘queering’ of American society.

Conclusion

It can well be argued that the preferred readings of folklore - the affirmations of nature and wholeness, the empowerment of the poor and the dispossessed, the alliance of the ordinary with the extraordinary in opposition to the hegemonic – can and should be broken down, in the spirit of Jacques Derrida’s aporia. The modern media’s reading ‘against the grain’ can also be regarded as an example of the parodic and oppositional readings that have long been celebrated as a component of traditional orature. One example came during the short American series of moon landings from 1969 to 1973 and became one of the defining media events of the late twentieth century. During a moonwalk, one of the astronauts unexpectedly sang:

I was strolling on the moon one day
In the merry, merry month of May,
When much to my surprise
A bonny pair of eyes [breaks off]ii

This apparently improvised parody of one of the standard openings of the nineteenth century Irish street song is masterly. However, when such re-readings are merely in the interests of a an ephemeral Hollywood hit or the launch of a new consumer brand, or to reinforce national stereotypes, it is relevant to question whether they are made in the spirit of dissent from the dominant discourse or merely driven by a quest for new consumer markets.

Folklore studies have in the past frequently served the interests of patriotic, imperial or romantic agendas. Such synthetic and totalizing worldviews may have no intellectual validity (and in the case of patriotism, are mutually cancelling), but they survive vigorously. Who could have predicted that, in Europe, nationalism would...
not merely survive Hitler but remain the dominant ideology of the states of the ‘supranational’ European Union? In such an ahistorical discourse, the global reach of folklore has little place. In the British and American media, folk songs have a dispersed existence as the scattered representatives of an alternative but marginalised worldview. However, as many have observed, this fragmentation is proving to be its strength on the internet, which operates in precisely the same decentralised way. The past appropriation of folk song by the media in the construction of a Scottish national identity, a historicized American individualism, and a concept of pastoral Englishness, has been undermined by the increased (but still far from universal) access that the internet offers.

Endnotes
2 These include Dahlov Ipcar’s Queen of Spells (1973), Elizabeth Pope’s Perilous Gard (1984), Joan Vinge’s ‘Tam Lin’ (short story, 1985), Diana Wynne Jones’ Fire and Hemlock (1985) and Pamela Dean’s Tam Lin (1991).
3 Transcribed from a documentary film of the moon landings, ‘The Last Frontier’, shown on Finnish television, YLE 1, Jan. 11, 1986.

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ANNOUNCEMENT

The theme of April 2005 issue of Indian Folklife is

“Folklore Abroad: The Diffusion and Revision of Sociocultural Categories”

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Much has been written about the outdated, ambiguous, embarrassing, stigmatized word that gives the name to our field. “Folklore” is a word we can neither live with nor, apparently, live without. The term is a moving target, impossible to pin down. “The folk,” for some, refers to a submissive lower class deluded by paternalism and not yet awakened to self-consciousness; while for others folklore is a rich repository of resistance and alternative histories. “Folklore” can evoke both the pseudoculture imposed by an authoritarian government and the grassroots culture that refuses this. The word is variably tinged with condescension, nostalgia, and defensiveness.

If folklore is a spoiled concept, “bad to think with” even in Europe where it was created; it is still more problematic when applied to non-Western societies. Arriving with colonialism or other forms of modernity, it is imposed without understanding of local cultural distinctions, or simply applied as a blanket framework to all non-Western expressions. How do we, the folklorists who persist in believing there is a “there there,” save ourselves? Is it reasonable to talk of folklore and the folk in non-Western societies? Or even in the West itself?

This special issue will explore the careers of “folklore” and related concepts in several national milieux. Roma Chatterji describes the trajectory in Bengal of the categories “desha” and “marga,” proposed by Ananda Coomaraswamy as indigenous substitutes for “folk” and “high.” Mbugua wa-Mungai examines the popular rejection in Kenya of the school-promoted category of “oral literature.” Ipek Celik documents the effect of changing attitudes towards ethnic diversity on the meaning of “people” and “people’s culture” in Turkey. In a similar development, Jing Li shows how the turn to a market economy in contemporary China has prompted a change in the definition of folklore, with ethnicity rather than class becoming the basis of authenticity claims. Dorothy Noyes provides a general discussion of sociocultural categories and observes the transition from “folk” to “world” in the contemporary U.S.