

Book Review: After Uniqueness: A History of Film and Video Art in Circulation by Erika Balsom

In After Uniqueness: A History of Film and Video Art in Circulation, Erika Balsom traces the ideological, technological and historical conventions that have framed the possibilities and meanings of image reproduction in the fields of film and video art. Looking at official and unofficial modes and channels of distribution, this is a careful, conscientious study shaped by Balsom's empathetic and attentive approach, writes Sander Hölsgens.

After Uniqueness: A History of Film and Video Art in Circulation. Erika Balsom. Columbia University Press. 2017.

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In *After Uniqueness: A History of Film and Video Art in Circulation*, Erika Balsom sketches the technological and ideological contours of the distribution and dissemination of film and video art primarily across North America and Western Europe. Balsom's study builds upon both well-known anecdotes and uncharted site- and era-specific rites, or what she defines as the 'extralegal social and historical conventions that shape the possibilities and meanings of image reproduction' (9). *After Uniqueness* manifests itself as an analytical and systemic chronology of sorts, orienting the art gallery and the BitTorrent tracker towards each other rather than suggesting a contradistinction between the formal exhibition space and the unauthorised online video archive. In so doing, Balsom explores the extent to which official and unofficial modes of distribution and circulation are folded into and transform one another in meaningful ways.

The historical praise of technological reproducibility moves in parallel to the chronic suspicion of the copy. From the Platonic differentiation between ideal forms and their inferior copies to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Romantic anxiety regarding the cultural depletion of uniqueness, Balsom roots her examination of film and video art within a genealogy of in/authenticity. In the first chapter, 'The Promise and Threat of Reproducibility', Balsom distinguishes sociocultural understandings of originality from the peculiar notion of authenticity. Originality points towards the importance of objects within 'a historical narrative of progression [...] claiming their value within a marketplace that puts a high value on rarity and innovations' (33), whereas authenticity also encapsulates experiences that are rooted within 'the subject'. Authenticity, Balsom writes, therefore 'enables a conceptualization of the relationship between the constitution of the subject and the world of things' (33).

In other words: authenticity is not an inherent characteristic or property of a film or video piece through which it can be interpreted as being either innovative or unoriginal among an existing corpus of work. Rather, authenticity emerges during the contact between moving images and 'the subject', whom I interpret as the spectator. In all but name, this approach therefore questions the classical dichotomy between subject and object.

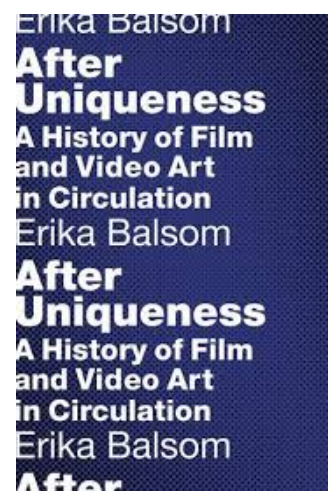




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Moreover, Balsom's genealogy of authenticity is insightful in that it makes poignantly visible how the contemporary, 'persistent desire for authenticity' is interwoven with technological and industrial forms of reproduction, as well as with the idea of reproducibility per se. Walter Benjamin, for instance, eulogised the seemingly authentic aura of a work of art as a sharp response to the age of mechanical reproduction. Similarly, 'the promiscuous travels of the digital image have given rise to a variety of responses that attempt to curtail this mobility and reassert the necessity of controlled, authentic images and experiences' (53).

The major difference, for Balsom, is that moving images now not only operate as both rare and reproducible, but are also celebrated in both capacities:

New forms of reproducibility inspire new forms of control, which in turn ignite the desire for the utopia of reproduction and prompt a search for practices of copying that will escape regulation (53).

The supposedly authentic limited-edition of a video, then, is praised both for being extraordinary and precious, but also for emerging online via unauthorised peer-to-peer networks. This online presence, through which videos are duplicated ad nauseam, may not be appreciated by collectors or indeed by the filmers themselves, some of whom subsequently aim to 'recuperate authenticity'. Ironically, though, these oftentimes medium-specific attempts to disseminate 'authentic' works further encourage certain 'cyberutopianists' to make these pieces accessible to anyone with internet access. Balsom calls this historical trajectory a dialectical movement, which seems to me to magnify both the desire for accessibility and the enchantment of authenticity.

In the fourth chapter, 'Copyright and the Commons', Balsom frees up space to discuss so-called purposeful pirates. She writes: 'In the Jordanian context, pirated films do not appear as transgressive but rather as the primary way that commercial films are distributed in the country' (116). Whereas copyrights in the United States and European Union are strict, extensive and lengthy, in Jordan films enter the public domain merely 50 years after the date of production. Significantly, this has allowed distributors of bootlegs to manifest themselves as archivists. The 1957 film *Struggle in Jerash*, for instance, 'would have been an orphaned work [in the United States or the European Union], that is, a work that is still under copyright but commercially unavailable, with no copyright owner to be found' (119). In Jordan, however, bootlegs allow archivists and local distributors to make available and circulate the film, which is now of significance as a historical document of sorts, foregrounding a site- and era-specific imaging and imagining of Jerusalem.

By working towards a careful and conscientious inquiry into the distribution and circulation of moving images, Balsom punctuates and discloses the specificity of individual film and video pieces, whilst also taking a stance amidst the often uncompromising and sometimes delicate discourse of genre. *After Uniqueness* subtly draws attention to how practices of artists' film, video art and experimental film differ from one another in terms of their historical modes of distribution and production. Simultaneously, though, the book embraces a fundamental disposition of categorisation by referring to the moving image in its 'artistic-independent-experimental-non-industrial-non-commercial-artisanal-expanded-oppositional-avant-garde incarnations' (18), as per Larry Jordan's striking suggestion. Facing both the fragility and ubiquity of reproducible images, this sensibility is indicative of how Balsom writes in proximity of moving images: full of concern and care, attentive and empathetic.

Sander Hölsgens hopes to approximate the colour blue through film. He is currently undertaking a PhD in architectural design at The Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, and is a section editor of Cultural Anthropology (Culanth.org). Find him on Twitter @sanderholsgens. [Read more by Sander Hölsgens.](#)

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.