

Looking at Facsimiles and Transcriptions of Ballads From an Artistic Perspective: How Reproduction Changes the Aura of a Ballad

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Introduction:

With my short experience with EBBA this quarter, I learned much about the work that occurs behind the scenes in order to create the extensive and diverse online library filled with easy to access English broadside ballads. The archive provides an extensive amount of information about each ballad that required a lot more behind the scenes work than I could have ever anticipated. With every keyword added to the list of a particular ballad, a researcher is required to understand and interpret ballads from long ago, with expressions and words we no longer use in the popular lexicon. Through transcribing the images of these ballads submitted by museums all around the world, researchers are also required to delve deep into the structure and details of every letter and symbol. Transcription requires ample interpretation, even as the ballad seems deceptively simple, as some symbols and ideas cannot be transcribed with the same impact as the image. As I have navigated through these aspects of the English Broadside Ballad Archive, I became more intrigued by the transcription aspect of the project. How much of the original ballad is lost through becoming a facsimile, and how much more is discarded when we simplify the facsimile into digital text? Although the process of digitizing Ballads previously only seen in museums fulfills the demand for easier access, is this process ultimately necessary even when the digitization removes aspects of the ballad that can only be processed by perceiving it in person?



Discussion:



As I started transcribing images of ballads taken by the Newberry Library into text, I began to understand how much of a ballad is lost when it is transcribed through a standardized measure. I recognize the necessity of the standardization, as there is a need to simplify a lengthy process that would have produced a much more complex result, but much is lost in the process. The individuality of the ballads is sacrificed for ease of access, which is ultimately the goal of the archive. Ebba does combat this loss by including images of ballads which display the art and design present in the artifact. However, when simply looking at the text transcription, much of the information on the artifact is lost. The image above is from the ballad



sheet facsimile of the artifact titled “The GENEVA BALLAD”. The image is of the letter ‘o’ surrounded by an intricate design. When transcribing this letter into a text transcription, the image is represented by the simple capital letter ‘O’. When just looking at the text transcription, one would not experience the original intricacies of the artifact. Much of my critique comes from the essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” by Walter Benjamin. In the text Benjamin mentions the phrase, “the aura of the original.” He explains how this aura is lost when there is a mechanical reproduction of a work of art. As I have only worked with text transcription, I am only able to analyze the ways in which aspects of the facsimile are lost when transcribed into text. However, I do believe that there is a sense of aura lost when viewing facsimiles rather than the original artifact.