Acta Univ. Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies, 24 (2023) 15–38

DOI: 10.2478/ausfm-2023-0012

Uncanny Colours of the Past. Phenomenological Notes on Remediation and Colourization of Black-and-White Footage

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Abstract. The article analyses the problem of colouring black and white archival footage in *Spain in Two Trenches: The Civil War in Colour* (*España en dos trincheras. La guerra civil en color*, Francesc Ecribano and Luis Carrizo, 2016), which was made by digitizing and colouring more than 450 surviving films of the Spanish Civil War. The analysis focuses on the kind of affects and perceptual mechanisms which might ensue from the colourization of archival black and white footage, and on the justification of the use of colour to authenticate an event that has already happened. At the beginning of the paper, the author briefly reviews the approaches of the increasingly close relationship between mediatization and memory, then focuses on the justification of colourization in the light of the Spanish documentary and compares it with issues of perceptual realism. In the final part of the analysis, the author examines the historical consequences of the reconfiguration of the past in colour.[1]

Keywords: colourization, remedialization, perceptual realism, found footage films, media ecology.

One day, as I was scrolling through Instagram, a photo of a seaside with a colourful cavalcade of sunbathers and beachgoers caught my eyes.[2] First, I noticed the woman standing with the grey umbrella and the boy with the green swimsuit, and then I started to look at the crowd of people swimming on the beach. The sight of the lady in the yellow hat became suspicious to me and I scrolled down to the caption of the

1 This work was supported by a grant of the Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digitization, CNCS – UEFISCDI, Romania, project number PN-III-P4-PCE-2021-1297 and by the ÚNKP-22-3 New National Excellence Program of the Ministry for Culture and Innovation from the Source of the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund, Hungary.

2 *https://www.instagram.com/p/CmNF6BjMMVJ/?hl=en.* Last accessed 25. 08. 2023.

picture: *A crowded beach in Atlantic City, New Jersey, photographed in 1908*. For a few seconds, the colourized photo uploaded to Instagram really deceived me with the addition of realistic colours, depth of field and shading: the bustling crowd in the colourful image blended effortlessly with the millions of other photos uploaded at the same time to the photo-sharing platform. More and more advanced digital colouring techniques allow us to see many (moving) image representations of our history in colour that were only seen in black and white before: a portrait of Abraham Lincoln (1862), Jean-Claude Monet in his garden (1899), a Navajo man dressed as a mythical hero (1904), American soldiers on the battlefield in World War II (1942)[3] – it now seems that almost every corner of our past can be coloured. In addition to colourized photographs, the last decade has seen an increasing number of documentaries featuring colourized footage of historical significance, such as *They Shall Not Grow Old* (Peter Jackson, 2018), *Warsaw Uprising* (Jan Komasa, 2014) and *Auschwitz Untold in Colour* (David Shulman, 2020). But the final result of colourized photographs seems to be (still) different, albeit slightly, from colourized moving images. In my view, the realism of the former is superior to the latter: while in a still image the technique of colour, contours, depth of field and shading can be more easily executed and the result is "believable," in the case of motion pictures the not fully authentic colouring can disrupt the spectator's cinematic experience.

In what follows, I will analyse the problem of colouring black and white archival footage in *Spain in Two Trenches: The Civil War in Colour* (*España en dos trincheras. La guerra civil en color*, Francesc Ecribano and Luis Carrizo, 2016), which was made by digitizing and colouring more than 450 surviving films of the Spanish Civil War. Although the film is composed of archival footage, it was "shot" in 2016 through the addition of colour and rearrangement. In the film, the archival footage was digitized in 4K and modified using rotoscoping and masking techniques: the filmmakers first isolated the elements seen in the scenes and then animated them. The filmmakers were also able to select a large number of shots because at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War journalists and photographers were already using 16mm film cameras and the lighter Leica IIIa, which allowed much greater mobility – and so a large number of moving and still images were taken during the Civil War. Although my analysis focuses primarily on this film, I will attempt to make more general statements about the phenomenon, justification and problems of documentary colouring.

3 *https://historycolored.com/photos/9883/top-15-most-popular-colorized-photos-of-2022-instagram-edition/?fbclid=IwAR1Nw8BtajHn_97mNiidu1FwGtKqK_0IUL0a9-GGLx7ui0pHJzsk8GWNO44*. Last accessed 25. 08. 2023.

The methodology of my analysis is based on Neil Postman's concept of media ecology, by which he means the study of the media environment (the structure, content, and impact on people) and "how media of communication affect human perception, understanding, feeling, and value" (Postman 1970, 161). My analysis does not attempt to provide a holistic explanation of the problem of digital colouring, but rather focuses on certain aspects of it: since rapidly developing colourization technologies are producing an increasingly diverse range of photographic and filmic results, my analysis is not intended to be a detailed examination of the whole, diverse field.

Mediatized Past, Media Memory, Remediation

"The digital does rupture and utterly reimagine and replace the twentieth century's imaginings, aspirations and technologies of memory" – Andrew Hoskins's (2018, 6) observations on the changing conceptualization of memory and the experience of time brought about by digitalization point precisely to the fact that the social and cultural framework of memory in our time has become much more uncertain and looser than in the previous century. Since the "second memory boom"[4] the role of the media has become increasingly dominant in the field of memory studies: alongside the initial concept of a mediatized past, new subfields have emerged that no longer consider media as ancillary but make it the central object of their analysis and a fundamental part of memory, such as media memory studies or digital memory studies. Although the different schools of memory studies do not always make compatible claims, they share a common starting point: that by the 21st century, our past, our history and even our present have become fully mediatized. Through the various forms of recording, editing and archiving, we store pieces of our history in a mediatized way: not only can we look back and listen to material recorded by the media invented and developed in the 19th and 20th centuries (photography, radio, television, internet), but we can also use them to re-present events from earlier times. It can now be stated without reservation that the media and historical events are inseparable: to understand the past, it is essential to examine how history is represented in media, since

4 In the twentieth century, the dominance of the media began to increasingly define the social and individual framework of memory. "The start of the second memory boom thus marked a convergence a new public will-to-remember with the technologies that gave such remembrances their archival form, including the dominance of the institutions of Big Media and state with relative control over access to and dissemination of the public archives of heritage, museums, broadcast and other media content" (Hoskins 2018, 7).

"memory as such is constantly renewed by the media and technologies (and the metaphors) of the day – in this way it is always 'new' – as well as through these same media reflexively shaping a reassessment of the very value of remembering and forgetting under these conditions" (Hoskins 2016, 15). The phenomenon Andrew Hoskins calls the "connective turn" ("the immediacy, connectivity and volume of digital data and information" [Hoskins and Halsted, 2021]) could lead to a new approach to history and an ontological turn in the study of memory. "It has re-engineered memory, liberating it from the traditional bounds of the spatial archive, the organization, the institution, and distributed it on a continuous basis via a connectivity between brains, bodies, and personal and public lives. This opening up of new ways of finding, sorting, sifting, using, seeing, losing and abusing the past, both imprisons and liberates active human remembering and forgetting" – Hoskins writes (2018, 1–2). In the last decade, the idea of memory as a process and not as fixed has inspired approaches such as "prosthetic memory" (Landsberg 2004), "multidirectional memories" (Rothberg 2009) or "travelling memory" (Erll 2011).

I consider one of the main intersections and common points of these approaches to be an earlier concept that Hoskins created in the 2000s, the new memory. The theorist argues that in our social milieu defined by digital recording technologies and media, we need to rethink the basic concepts and claims of memory studies that have been used for decades. He believes that we can no longer consider the representation of a particular historical event as secondary, but rather make the mediatized representation itself the primary object of experience. The concept of new memory points to the transmediation of collective memory, to the changed medial conditions, and to the rupture in our relationship to the past in the late modern era (Hoskins 2001). The real stake of Hoskins's analysis is to point out that this kind of new memory does not only imply that a given (historical) event is now mediatized and manipulated, but rather that he sees the individual medium as a "site of the production of the 'original' memory" (Hoskins 2001, 340). In his view, representation is no longer secondary to the actual event, but it precedes that: we store information about the past in our minds almost exclusively in mediatized forms. It is this medial primacy that distinguishes the new memory from the old: it is not the historical event that we remember, but the mediatized form of the historical event: the mediated content is the event itself.[5] In other

5 "To this end it is critical to recognize that a new ontology for memory studies is needed that is cognizant of media, and not as some partial or occasional or temporary shaper of memory, but as fundamentally altering what it is and what is possible to remember and to forget" (Hoskins 2018, 7).

words, mediatization is not secondary to the experience, but part of it, and the further we are from an event, the more its role is enhanced – our access to the world is primarily through these mediated channels. Furthermore, it is crucial to state that the media are not seen as an external tool or "container" to help store human memory, but rather as an intertwining of the two: Hoskins sees memory as a "dynamic trajectory of hyper-relationships" that can no longer be separated from the means that act on it or create it (Hoskins 2016, 18). However, it is important to clarify that in the context of contemporary user culture, this shift in digital culture is not an absolute opposition to the past.

It is not only that; with the development of television and the spread of social media, more and more images of the world around us are being recorded, shared, broadcast and archived in one way or another by different media, but that this mechanism also works backwards in time. As John Whiteclay Chambers and David Culbert note: "the public memory of war in the twentieth century has been created less from a remembered past than from a manufactured past, one substantially shaped by images in documentaries, feature films and television programs" (Whiteclay and Culbert 1996, 6). The focus of the authors' analysis is the extent to which contemporary culture is defined by fictional and documentary images and perspectives of the world and how these affect our perceptions of reality.[6] In other words, we do not only store the present as the past, but also constantly re-archive the bygone events. Technological advances have made it possible to store more and more memory, thus, in a sense, we can speak of a "saturation of memory." On the one hand, the continuous recording of our present creates an unprecedented amount of visual documentation of the world around us,[7] but for the purposes of my current analysis it is more important to focus on the mediatized representation of the past. Pierre Nora's analysis from 1989 is not yet about the digital conditions of today but it is a study of memory in general. In this essay, he already named memory archival

6 Similarly, Vivian Sobchack argues for the medial malleability of the past, focusing less on the novelty of twentieth-century events and more on the "novel technologies of representation" that has made visible events never seen before. Thus, the occurrence of an event and its representation have become increasingly simultaneous: the theorist argues that the time required to "become history" has been shortened: history is no longer happened "before" us and "after" us, but "history is happening now." And with the extensive mediatization of our lives, our image of history is transformed as well. By this, Sobchack refers not only to the immediacy of live broadcastings, but also to the continuous use and transformation of archival recordings in the present, and thus to the modification of their meaning (Sobchack 1996, 4–5).

7 Hoskins later refers to this phenomenon as "grey memory:" "And that brings us on to the notion of 'grey memory:' the sense that a conscious, active, willed memory is obscured in the digital era." "Grey memory" is "a kind of shapeless and diffused memory in which the world around us slips out of focus as compulsive digital recording and sharing of the present becomes more important than experiencing it" (Hoskins and Halsted 2021).

even though it was then identified as modern memory: contemporary memory. He writes that memory "relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image" (Nora 1989, 13). He argues that the vocation of memory is rather the continuous preservation of the present, which is passing away at every moment: thus, "[memory] has been wholly absorbed by its meticulous reconstitution" (Nora 1989, 13).

What Nora identifies as memory is in fact a vast repository of material that would be impossible to remember or recall even in fragments. In accordance with this, Hoskins argues that since the end of the 20th century to archive is to "no longer require the need to remember it:" the theorist believes that "the contestation of memory has shifted from memory to the archive itself" (Hoskins 2001, 344). This role of the archive has always been present in cultural theory, but what is new is that digital archives can be identified as a data set: it is the time of the archive that is changing, i.e. as if digital archives hold the absolute promise of accessibility.

Therefore, the stakes of my article are related to the claims associated with the "third memory boom," i.e. the belief in the knowability of the archive: "if we look hard enough and wide enough and long enough, the truth will surely (and must) be found" (Hoskins 2018, 4). What does this new turn of memory mean specifically for the study of archival footage, and how can we approach from this perspective those contemporary found footage films which are using old footage, often of historical significance? To explore the problem of colourization, it is worth focusing briefly on the issue of the remediation of archival footage first. In her book *Remediating Transcultural Memory*, Dagmar Brunow argues that archival footage both exemplifies "the media specificity of memory" and raises the problems of adapting and modifying memory (Brunow 2015, 4). The theorist uses the remediation concept of Astrid Erll, which refers to the re-representation of events on different medial platforms. In her view, remediation can, on the one hand, contribute to the stabilization of our cultural memory by repeating or creating certain narratives of the past, and on the other hand, its reappearance in a new context can also destabilize it (Erll 2008, 393). The techniques of representation and archiving of the 1970s were already good examples of the construction of narratives of the past, since confrontation and public reckoning with the world war and other disasters were made possible primarily through the audiovisual media of the time (Hoskins 2018, 6).

Brunow uses Aleida Assmann's terms "storage memory" and "functional memory" to analyse the phenomenon of remediation: to bring archival images

to life, it is necessary to remediate and circulate them on different media platforms (one of the means of doing this is, for example, the digitization of analogue recordings). In this way, old material can become part of functional memory: Brunow thus identifies the archival condition with storage memory, and remediation with functional memory, because "what is not continuously remediated, will soon be forgotten" (Brunow 2015, 15). Referring to the theorist Stuart Hall's assertion ("The past cannot speak, except through its 'archive'" [Hall 1991, 152]), he argues that dealing with archival material in a cinematic sense can be understood as an "act of remembrance," which he also attributes a performative character, since he conceives remembrance not as a constant, stable state, but as a process. This approach also implies a reformulation of the phenomenon of remediation. In Brunow's view, in earlier discourses on remediation, the medial material in the public space had a secure meaning, which had been displaced by its re-mediation and its meaning superseded by a new layer. However, Brunow argues that in this case it is important to point out that archival images, photographs, film footage, etc. should not be ascribed an inherent meaning, an essentially true character, or an original meaning, but that these medial traces are "the result of a set of practices within a specific discursive framework. Each new dissemination creates new meanings. Thus, photographs (and the same goes for archival film footage) are polyvocal, 'multiaccentual'" (Brunow 2015, 150). Brunow quotes Stuart Hall who says that "no such previously natural moment of true meaning, untouched by the codes and social relations of production and reading, and transcending historical time, exists" (Hall 1991, 152).

The perception of re-used archive footage could be approached in a film-phenomenological way through Jaimie Baron's concept of the archive effect. This term refers to the viewer's realization that the footage was shot in a different era to his or her own (Baron 2014, 19). However, *Spain in Two Trenches* reduces the sense of temporal distance that the archival effect induces by colourizing the black and white footage,[8] which is now perceived as almost abstract, and thus "contemporizing" the shots. One of the main concerns of my analysis is how this documentary – which focuses specifically on remembrance in the present – is organized into a particular form of archival material, and how the viewer's perception of the familiar footage is altered by the effect of the remediation.

8 Cf. A viewer's comment on the video called *The Early 20th Century Seen in Real Color*: "Historic photos in color simply feel more 'real' to me, than black and white ones do." *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QsN2PBhYMPI&t=390s* Last accessed 03.02.2023.

Layered and "Free-floating" Colours

Why do we need colourization to create the illusion of "liveness"[9] and to authenticate historical documentary footage, i.e. what makes colour footage more authentic for the contemporary viewer? If we would like to approach this problem from a perceptual point of view, we should first look at it from the problem of realism. On the one hand, it could be argued that our perception is influenced by technology, by changes in media configurations, and that black and white moving images may appear abstract to the contemporary viewer. In my view, one of the aims of the colouring was to create the illusion of increased spatiality, since this property of moving images that can best blur the distinction between simulation and reality. This issue was already a priority at the time of the advent of colour film, since, as Friedrich Kittler notes, after the introduction of stereo sound and the widescreen, colour was "able to deceive the three-dimensionality of ears and eyes" (Kittler 2010, 207). In the context of spatiality and photographic authenticity, David N. Rodowick uses Stephen Prince's concept of perceptual realism, which focuses on the production of cultural norms of representation. In Rodowick's view, if we deem an image to be real based on our everyday perception, we will thereby judge it to be representational in nature – "representation is defined as spatial correspondence" (Rodowick 2007, 102). Rodowick quotes Stephen Prince, who draws parallels between everyday perception and the representational modes and codes of images: "A perceptually realistic image is one which structurally corresponds to the viewer's audiovisual experience of three-dimensional space. Perceptually realistic images correspond to this experience because film-makers build them to do so. Such images display a nested hierarchy of cues which organize the display of light, color, texture, movement, and sound in ways that correspond with the viewer's own understanding of these phenomena in daily life" (Prince 1996, 32). (However, it is important to note that Rodowick's and Prince's claims are not mutually compatible, the two theorists are not making assertions that are consistent with each other. Although Prince's concept is very important for Rodowick, since it allows him to capture and analyse the kind of realism whose essence is that "real is what is *like* the real," Rodowick emphasizes not the spatial

9 In one of *ranker.com*'s articles featuring colourized historical photos, users cannot only view the modified images, but also vote under each photo: "Vote up the old pictures in color that make you see the event, person, time, or place completely differently." *https://www.ranker.com/list/colorized-historical-photos/mallory-weiler?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=creepy&pgid=1011190218967434&utm_campaign=colorized-historical-photos&fbclid=IwAR2_Miro9NSk0hcnHvrp2L6_ZRLdc1lkAn-3mTz3utl3F_v4336F58Kx5g8* Last accessed 28. 08. 2023.

information but the weakening of continuity in the analogue-digital shift. This is because the indexicality that characterizes analogue photography, i.e. the fact that the photograph develops a kind of continuity with its subject, is weakened in the case of digital image.)

If we take this theory of correspondence as a basis for analysing reactions to rare colour footage of historical events, the users' opinion that Jaimie Baron examines in relation to National Geographic's *WWII in Color* (Vincent Kralyevich, 1998)[10] can be more easily explained. In Baron's view, the footage does not offer new information or a "radical revision" of the black and white moving images we have seen before: the films do not promise intellectual understanding but an affective sense of presence. According to the theorist, colour in this case serves to suspend temporal disparity, and thus the viewer feels closer in time to the events he or she sees. If we look at the footage of *Spain in Two Trenches* from this point of view, we are dealing with a kind of "artificial proximity:" the filmmakers attempt to satisfy the viewer's affective desire for presence by artificially endowing the scenes with spatiality, thus reducing temporal disparity. This, of course, cannot be attributed to the explicit intention of the filmmakers, but it is a consequence.

If we look at the problem of spatiality in the case of the Spanish film, we can notice that we as spectators are not only disturbed by the result of the added colours – that, despite the intention of the artists, the colours seem to be added afterwards and not really "realistic" or lifelike, but in places the shots seem to lose their depth, the people and objects in the background become papery: as if there is only height and width, without depth, as if the spectator's sense of depth of field would be lost. [Figs. 1–2.] In my view, in technical terms the change in depth occurred because the colourization also modifies the depth of field: while in some of the original shots the depth of field seemed to be small (meaning that it could have been shot with a f2.8–5.6 aperture), the colourization made it larger. The reason, I believe, is that the figures in the background, originally blurred because of the small depth of field. Their shapes are made vivid by the strong contours the colouring gives them, so that the figures in the background now have strange blurred–sharp borders. (The colourization in the film gives the effect of having changed the shots from a large aperture to a smaller [about f16].)

10 "Seeing things in color that I have always seen in black and white before somehow brings them closer to home – it makes it easier to identify with the people. For me, this helps bring more immediacy to the stories my stepdad told me about his experiences in that war." "It is very different to watch WWII movies in color. Most of us are accustomed to the black and white scenes that are so very familiar. World War II in color is rather chilling. To see the war, its graphicness, its horror, even the mundane, in color you get a more realistic view" (Baron 2014, 165).

However, because the shapes in the background of the black and white footage are not originally sharp, the colourized version will not produce a sharp image in all its corners, but rather as if we were looking at superimposed images – with an effect similar to that of a fold-out book or cut-out cardboard figures. In this way, although the colourization serves to increase the sense of spatiality, the technical solutions mean that the colour remains layered in most cases.[11]

This kind of layering can be reminiscent of the stencilled colour solutions of the early film era. In my view, colours never cease to be "added:" they never become part, essence, constituent of the objects seen in the shot (since they are essentially black and white), but exist on the surface of the picture plane, as patches of colour. An interesting parallel can be drawn with the observations of Jacques Aumont, who, in relation to the early stencil-coloured films, argued that "hand-painting or stencilling […] tends to produce patches of colour floating in front of objects and blurring their shape. This 'free-floating' colour becomes more or less independent of the objects 'behind' it, which is rather eery. If we think about this phenomenologically, we might wonder how we can even identify the colourless objects behind these floating colours. […] On a perceptual level, colour generally seems to possess an independent material existence, more or less detached from the objects represented in these films" (Aumont 1996, 53–54). Based on Aumont's concept, we can therefore consider colour as a separate level, and we can think of it as a temporal layer.

The approach of colour as a temporal layer can also be explained in terms of Hoskins' concept of the "presentness effect:" this term describes the effects of television, through which electronic media (primarily television) manipulate time and space to assemble various elements of the past into "living" material. This kind of chronologically perfected stream is the opposite of the fragmentary, discontinuous nature of human memory – so the electronic media give us the impression of always having the most recent version of the past in the present. As Andreas Huyssen writes: "all representation – whether in language, narrative, image, or recorded sound – is based on memory. *Re*-presentation always comes after, even though some media will try to provide us with the delusion of pure presence. But rather than leading us to some authentic origin or giving us verifiable access to the real, memory, even and especially in its belatedness, is itself based on representation" (1995, 2–3). If our claim is that in the Spanish film the colour was intended to amplify a sense of presence or presentness, then it can be argued that ideally, the use of colour can also function as a means of

11 Livingstone (2019) calls this a "perspectivally flattened space."

becoming the Assmannian living memory cited earlier. By bringing archival material into the present and with the layer of colour the directors give us the illusion of the "most recent" version of the past. I will return to the problem of the phenomenologically accessible past later.

Functions of Colouring and Its Phenomenological Consequences

As we have seen, colouring can be seen as a spatializing tool, which theoretically increases the sense of presence in an affective way and enhances those perceptual processes of the viewer that are linked to perceptual realism.[12] In what follows, I will briefly examine the types of impressions and effects produced by colouring.

At first glance, the colourization of the film can be interpreted as a desire for realism, but the striking, garish and, in many cases, floating layers of colour[13] on the figures do not fully achieve the sense of indexicality. Therefore, the shots could be perceived as losing their indexicality rather than becoming more "real:" the people and places in the footage are both actualized by being saturated with present-day colours and fictionalized by the striking, glaring colours. In this case, at first sight one might claim that the footage has become fake, that the directors' presentism has obscured the realistic representation of the original shots. However,

12 However, Rodowick points out that this perception of realism is medium-dependent, therefore changes over time. In his view, the ontology of our time is no longer photographic, characterized by indexicality and causality, but videographic: "the perceptual norm for the vast majority of spectators is videographic. It may be the case that contemporary spectators also 'want' the videographic as the will to a new electronic, rather than photographic, ontology" (Rodowick 2007, 109). Rodowick thus argues that our vision is fundamentally determined by the media configuration we live in, as it determines the norms we look for in previous techniques.

13 Gilles Deleuze classifies the "colour-image" as a kind of "any-space-whatever," which he does not consider symbolic or referential, but as a form of perceptual affect. "The colour-image does not refer to a particular object but absorbs all that it can: it is the power which seizes all that happens within its range, or the quality common to completely different objects. […] Colour is the affect itself, that is, the virtual conjunction of all the objects which it picks up" (Deleuze 1986, 118). The colour-image, in Deleuze's interpretation, is able to reorganize and transform movement and to create a state of dream, magic or strangeness by suspending its narrative functions: that is, colours rise up beyond the actual situation of the film narrative, and the characters, objects and the whole situation are merged into a collective, virtual movement of pure affect (Tasevska 2020). Of course, Deleuze's theory cannot be clearly paralleled with the colourization techniques of the Spanish film, since, as a documentary, even if it appears as a highly edited story, the typology of movement-images (perception-image, action-image, affect-image) cannot be applied to it. In analysing the effects of added colour, however, I believe that Deleuze's observations on temporality can move the subject of our study in an important direction: according to the philosopher, the colour-image emerges as a cinematic stoppage that interrupts the narrative continuity of the film and signals a temporality that exists beyond the diegesis (Deleuze 1989, 182–184).

if we compare this problem with Rodowick's claims about videographic ontology, i.e. the medium-specific, altered receptivity and perception of contemporary viewers, we can also argue that *Spain in Two Trenches* functions less as an imprint of the past than as a reinterpretation of the past in a contemporary context. This way of representing the past satisfies the needs of the viewers of our present time. As Beja Margitházi notes in the case of another sharply coloured film (*Warsaw Uprising*), the post-colouring, noise and synchronous sounds are made "for a contemporary audience, living in a new media environment, marked by speed, never ending entertainment and hyperstimulation on the senses" (Margitházi 2018). Therefore, the audiovisual modifications of these films can be approached as a response to the demands of the contemporary audience.[14]

A similar argument is made by Tom Livingstone, who suggests that the modifications of archival material do not necessarily prompt the viewer to question the footage's historical authenticity, despite its obvious alteration and manipulation. "'the colourized archive,' provokes little anxiety with regards to the truth content of the archive, despite the normative thrust and re-significatory impact of colourisation. […] colourisation updates the archive, but not to the technical standards of photorealism. Rather, colourisation updates the archive to the epistemological context […], wherein a media-contingent historical consciousness is undergoing a process of digital retroaction" (Livingstone 2019). On the loosened relationship between found footage films and indexicality, Desmond Bell argues that the archive ceases to be a signifier as soon as it is organized into a film format. "The found footage film does not seek to offer the immediate, indexical access to the past promised by the original photographic sources from which it is assembled. For in the found footage film the images are all mixed up. Combined together under a montage principle, they establish a different sort of relationship with the past to the denotational claims made for the individual photographic image" (Bell 2004).

In the case of *Spain in Two Trenches*, I would also add the explanatory function to Bell's remarks: in this film, in addition to the palpable ideological position of the extradiegetic narrative voice, which is typical of voice-of-god documentaries, the viewer's attention is directed by other audiovisual means, thus going beyond the status of found footage. This explanatory function is provided by the colour treatment, and within this, we could distinguish further categories. One of the most striking techniques in the film is highlighting and directing attention. This is particularly noticeable in scenes where flags are presented. In each case, the

14 In her analysis of *They Shall Not Grow Old*, Eszter Knopp (2020) makes similar observations.

filmmakers use strong colours to emphasize the affiliation of the armies, thus determining the direction of our gaze in the archival footage. Another function of the use of colour can be homogenization. [Figs. 3–6.] In several crowd scenes, although the figures in the shot pass each other in bright light, we can observe that they do not cast any shadows on each other in the coloured shot. Similarly, the colour of the uniforms is indistinguishably homogenous: the play of light and shadow almost disappears from the film, and the figures often merge into a large mass. In contrast to this, a third technique, individualization is emphasized in a few cases in particular: the shots of military leaders, people of higher rank, who are mentioned by name, are more meticulously coloured and more highlighted from their background and from the environment around them. In my view, these functions and effects are related: although it is possible that the detailed separation, which is likely to be challenging to implement, has not been carried out because of technical difficulties, the striking colour of the flags, the grouping of fighting civilians and soldiers into a homogeneous patch of colour, and the highlighting of the leaders by colours, provides a clear message without the need for an audio narration.

Perhaps the function that most subverts the status of archival footage is the immersive effect. In several scenes of the film, we see colourized sights that could be described as fairytale-like: the azure sky, the silky green grass, the golden yellow hay all provide an inviting scene to be immersed in. Thus, it is precisely the indexicality of the original footage that is tested by transforming the scenes of battle into pleasant landscapes for the viewer. This problem can also be approached from the perspective of Prince, who argues that digital effects are becoming more and more seamlessly part of the indexical image and in this changed perceptual environment a rupture occurred between the two types of realism: referentially and perceptually realistic images. "Referentially realistic images bear indexical and iconic homologies with their referents. They resemble the referent, which, in turn, stands in a causal, existential relationship to the image. A perceptually realistic image is one which structurally corresponds to the viewer's audiovisual experience of three- dimensional space. Perceptual realism, therefore, designates a relationship between the image or film and the spectator, and it can encompass both unreal images and those which are referentially realistic" (Prince 1996, 32).

Thus, in the case of *Spain in Two Trenches*, I distinguish two possible spectator behaviours. On the one hand, the footage loses its original, photographic, indexical character by becoming manipulated: despite the filmmakers' efforts

to use historically authentic colours, the strikingly bright colours are distanced from the original colours of the figures and objects. However, perceptually we can consider them to be realistic to some extent, since we also perceive our surroundings in colour in our everyday life – but of course, it should be added that the colourized shots are too striking in this respect as well, and the modification of depth of field affects the perception of spatiality. On the other hand, if the latter question is analysed in terms of the fact that this film – as mentioned above – was made for contemporary spectators in a new media environment, from a perceptual point of view the scenes can be described as, if not entirely so, realistic. These two types of viewer behaviours may arise from the recognition of the archival nature of the footage – even if only hypothetically, let us assume that a viewer does not notice the colourized nature of the film (hypothetically, because the striking nature of the colouring is difficult to lose sight of). Since on the narrative level it is not conveyed to the spectators that these scenes are colourized and were originally black and white shots, the hypothetical viewer may believe that they are looking at an indexical document – the manipulation becoming invisible to them. According to this, we could interpret the intention of the filmmakers as an attempt to erode the archival effect. However, in the other case, if the viewer recognizes the manipulative effect of the colourization, the sense of temporal disparity could also trigger the archival effect. However, the colourization creates a kind of double spectatorial consciousness: we know that the colours were added later, yet we feel the footage closer to our present and to ourselves compared to watching it in black and white. Thus, the reception of colourized images is a matter of comparison: different modes of reception may emerge depending on whether we perceive the scenes as rather part of the past than of the present. Nevertheless, if we focus not only on the visuality of the coloured footage, but also on the narrative explanations on the auditory level and see the date written over the images, these obviously help the spectator's orientation in time. However, it is precisely these signs that create a kind of paradoxical spectatorial state: since we know from the dates and the narration that colour filming was not yet widespread at the time of the original footage, we still accept the colourized moving images as approximately authentic on a perceptual level. The case is further complicated by visual clues, which prove that the footage is old: in many cases, there are still some visual noises and small scratches that have been preserved in the footage. Despite the presence of colour, the viewer can often get the feeling that the footage is old: as if the archive images had not ceased to appear old. This kind of double play – to perceptually evoke

a sense of realism, while at the same time the same footage bears the marks of time – can thus evoke a particular sense of time in the viewer,[15] which can also evoke the atmosphere created by the medium-specific noises (Blos-Jáni 2018). The "old" look can also be interpreted as a style, or rather as a set of stylistic features: through colourization, the film shows past events as present – the visual noises and scratches of the shots only "evoke" the past, the stylistic features of footage from the past. From this point of view, we can also conclude that the digital can only present the past as a simultaneity.

Make the Imperceptible Perceptible: "Presentification" of the Past

The issue of "bringing the past closer" has come up several times during my analysis. The problem of the phenomenologically accessible past and colouring as a means of authentication evokes further questions of historical approaches. So far, I focused on the reasons why the spectators may feel closer the coloured footage on a perceptual level, as a next step, following the numerous comments on the Internet that advocate colouring. I will analyse the kind of views of history colourization can strengthen, the way they can be approached critically and linked to the phenomenon of remediation.

While watching colourized black and white footage, a frequent reaction of the audience is astonishment: upon seeing coloured footage, spectators feel much closer to the historical events in time. For example, in the comment section of a YouTube video, *The Early 20th Century Seen in Real Color*, one can read: "Makes me think... what's 100 years? That's nothing... it's such a short time. This was practically yesterday."; "I love how modern, yet timeless it looks! [...] Historic photos in colour simply feel more 'real' to me, than black and white ones do."; "The pictures of her truly seem as if they could have been taken yesterday, dispelling our conceited belief that we are somehow different, even 'better' or 'more evolved' than those from a hundred years ago"; "Those photos makes the present and past seem so interconnected. Instead of being a distant shadow in the past it drives home that she was a person just like you and me."[16] As can be observed from these

15 Although a different example in terms of genre, there is an interesting parallel with Hlynur Pálmason's film, *Godland* (*Vanskabte land*, 2022) in terms of its "old" appearance. In this contemporary film, the viewers can see artificially added visual noises, and the film's aspect ratio is also reminiscent of the format of old films, but the sharpness of the figures and objects on the screen clearly indicate that the film was made in the present.

16 *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QsN2PBhYMPI&t=390s* Last accessed 02. 08. 2023.

examples, the effects of colourized footage are usually twofold: on the one hand, the representation of a given, well-known historical event in colour becomes a new experience for the audience, and on the other hand, colouring seems to erase the seemingly unbridgeable distance between past and present, giving the illusion of continuity, unbrokenness and unproblematic accessibility of the past. The latter is connected on one hand with the arousal of a sense of presence and the problem of the mediatized past mentioned above, on the other hand, it is also motivated by more general problems of historical perception.

The accelerated and transformed archiving practices and the changes in function they bring along through technological processes have a profound impact on the way we view and relate to our past. After the third memory boom period, in the era of full digitization, the remediation of archival materials is having a radical impact on our approaches to history. As Hoskins notes, "the digital does reveal alien and unpalatable memories, but it also transcends the time of now and then, reconnecting, reimagining and reconstituting the past as network, as archive, as present" (Hoskins 2018, 5). In other words, in the contemporary remedial context, archival materials are not only present in a repeated way, but they offer themselves to us in a presentist way, as if they offer us a representation of the past and also create it in a present tense, placing it in the context of the present. The colourization technique of the film also confirms this hypothesis: although they offer representations of the past, the digitization of the analogue footage and its subsequent colourization transforms the parameters of the past in favour of present consumption and perception. The coloured closeups of Franco and Hitler offer a new and different visual experience: through colourization techniques, the characters in the archival footage are transposed to the spectators' present.

The complexity of this kind of presentism lies in the fact that the "presentification" of the past is both intentional and hidden. On the one hand, we consider a well-made coloured film as one that gives us the impression that we as spectators are more immersed in the spaces presented by the film and that we feel closer to ourselves what we are seeing in a way we have not experienced before – as if the filmmakers had done nothing, because we are not distracted by the constructedness of the footage. However, what can be identified as presentism in *Spain in Two Trenches*, is the trace of the colour functions listed in the previous chapter (fictionalizing, homogenizing, individualizing, immersive effects, etc.), since these refer to the presence of the creators, not the presence of the object itself. But since the filmmakers' aim is to represent the object, their need to go beyond mediatization appears: the presence of the object should overshadow the presence of the creators.

Our present time is also changing under the influence of (re)mediatization and digitalization: according to Andreas Hepp, we are living in a period of "deep mediatization," in which "digitalisation and related datafication interweaves our social world even more deeply with this entanglement of media and practices. Given the significance of media today as a defining part of the specific character of our social world, we can understand the present stage of mediatisation as one of 'deep mediatization'" (Hepp 2016, 919). In the case of *Spain in Two Trenches*, we can thus speak of a "digital hijacking" (Hoskins 2018, 6) of old footage: the translation from analogue and the perceptually realistic images may be a consequence of an era that has remediated both past and present, and subverted the status of archival material. In this way, the colouring can be understood as a digital reimagination of the past: the act of taking the spectator closer to the events of the Spanish Civil War and the actualization and accessibility of the presence of the past can all be understood as effects of this contemporary medial-memorial environment. Furthermore, the audience no longer necessarily demands that archival materials remain untouched and unaltered: as I wrote earlier about the evidential value of old footage, and as Livingstone notes in relation to *They Shall Not Grow Old*: "the epistemic formation modelled by the film is one in which photorealism and digital manipulations have a symbiotic relationship in almost every image we see" (Livingstone 2019).

Given the technical context, the reconfiguration of the past by colouring seems almost inevitable in contemporary consumer culture. But in some ways, colourization has an illusory effect on the way history is viewed and approached. By actualizing the past, by bringing it into the present, the film seems to imply that through colourization the human experience of earlier periods can be made accessible. Indeed, the comments quoted above evoke similar feelings: the black-and-white shots, complemented by colour, give the audience the illusion that there is hardly any difference between our present and the lives of people from a hundred years ago. The idea of an unbroken, continuous link between past and present[17] is problematic in several ways: on one hand, immersion in the past

17 Although in this analysis I focus primarily on the phenomenological causes and consequences of colouring, I also consider it possible to analyse this problem from a broader social-theoretical, epistemological perspective, including a historical approach following the French Annales school. For instance, against the idea of an unbroken, continuous relation between the past and the present, Michel Foucault considered it a priority to make the circumstances of the past visible to understand and critically evaluate the present. In his view, the past is never directly given and evident to us, we cannot subordinate it to our own present – to do so is to create a false continuity: "'Effective' history differs from traditional history in being without constants. […] The traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history and for retracing the

presupposes that there is a kind of reciprocity between us and the spectacle – as viewers, we can immerse in the same perception as the subjects of the past, that is, we can perceive the world in the same way as they did and, in turn, they would perceive the world in the same way as we do. On the other hand, if we believe that there is an unimpeded continuity between the lives of people from the past and of our own, we are questioning history itself by perceptualizing their past and our present as the same time. Through colourization, our perception of time is radically confused, as the filmmakers attempt to make the imperceptible perceptible: not because it is sensually impossible to feel it, but because it is past, and therefore, not directly and continuously accessible. Thus, the coloured footage is fake, not because it distorts historical facts, conceals certain events, or misrepresents war heroes, rather, its falsity is due to the fact that it does not deal with the discontinuous nature of history, meaning that it makes the past unproblematically narratable through colour.

Thus, interpreted in the context of the colourized documentaries and the reactions of the viewers, there is a conceptual difference: spectators who experience the past through seeing the colourized footage are affected by the footage on a sensual level rather than on an intellectual level. Therefore, the assertion that colourized documentaries "bring us closer" to the past is perceptually true: although certain details become more recognizable in the footage, it does not reduce our distance from history or past events, nor does it serve our intellectual understanding of them. Instead of the presumed stance of these films – that the past can be accessed unproblematically through the use of colour – I believe they primarily satisfy the eyes of the viewer socialized in a new media environment on a perceptual level.

While in 1986, MGM Entertainment's plan to digitally colourize many of its earlier black-and-white films was vociferously opposed by a range of Hollywood directors, actors and film critics, there are hardly any objections to colourized versions of historical events nowadays. The vehement opposition of the film professionals forty years ago was triggered by the fact that they did not want to "transform a monochrome movie into a digitally re-made spectacle" and "destroy the visual pastness that could embed original black and white films within the tissues of cultural and aesthetic memory" (Grainge 2018, 202). The demands of the

past as a patient and continuous development must be systematically dismantled. Knowledge, even under the banner of history, does not depend on 'rediscovery', and it emphatically excludes the 'rediscovery of ourselves.' History becomes 'effective' to the degree that it introduces discontinuity into our very being […] knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting" (Foucault 1977, 153–154).

anti-colourization lobby are now almost inconceivable: according to the reactions of the public, the popularity of colourized documentaries seems to be increasing. In my analysis, I have made an attempt, albeit not exhaustive, to present some aspects that may point to the justification for colouring old footage. In my medial and phenomenological examinations, I focused on the particularities of the mediatized environment surrounding the Spanish film and the mechanisms of memory that are being transformed by digitalization. Subsequently, I analysed the peculiar, non-realistic visual world of the film in the context of everyday perception. To conclude, I have pointed out that while *Spain in Two Trenches* may carry the effects of the surrounding mediatized environment, the film itself can also shape the views of history of its audience. The implication that the past and present can be seamlessly bridged may make spectators feel as if people who lived a hundred years ago would be "within arm's reach" of them. In my analysis I argued that although the past may indeed seem more accessible from a sensory and phenomenological point of view through colouring, we should not lose sight of the thresholds, boundaries, discontinuities that exist between the time of the coloured figures and our own present. Although every corner of history can be coloured today, the gaps between our present and the past cannot be filled with colours.

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Figures 1–2. *Spain in Two Trenches: The Civil War in Colour* (*España en dos trincheras. La guerra civil en color*, Francesc Ecribano and Luis Carrizo, 2016). The problem of depth of field: the shots seem to lose their depth, the people and objects in the background become papery.





Figure 3–6. *Spain in Two Trenches: The Civil War in Colour* (*España en dos trincheras. La guerra civil en color*, Francesc Ecribano and Luis Carrizo, 2016). The homogenizing and attention-directing effect of the film.








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