

Colourized Histories and “Presentification” of the Past

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Abstract

“At the dawn of the 20th century, a rapidly changing world was being captured for the first time by a wonderful new device, the movie camera. Now, more than a hundred years later, we can see those black-and-white images in colour, letting us witness what the cameraman saw through his lens.” – explains the narrator of *Revolution in Colour* (Martin Dwan, 2016) at the beginning of the film. In this documentary about the Irish Civil War, West Wing Studios’ specialists have digitized and colourized archival black-and-white newsreel footage, then arranged it chronologically to present the Civil War as “it has never been seen before”. However, to what extent can we speak of novelty in this case, and can the spectacle that “the cameraman saw through his lens” really be reconstructed? In my presentation, I analyse the problem of colouring black-and-white archival footage in two films: the *Revolution in Colour* (Martin Dwan, 2016) and *Warsaw Uprising* (Powstanie Warszawskie, Jan Komasa, 2014). The focus of my analysis is to explore how does the contemporary cultural and media environment effect our perceptual mechanisms and make the colourisation of archival black-and-white footage so attractive? Why the contemporary consumer feels the need to make old footage “alive” with colours? At the beginning of my presentation, I will focus on the ontology of digital imagery: how the archival footage are transformed or translated from analogue to digital, and what concepts can be used to describe their new state. I will then examine the possible social causes of digital colourisation and the visual consequences of adding colour to archival footage: in the case of Irish film, I will discuss this problem in detail along a typology specifically created for this analysis. In the second half of my presentation, I will analyse the phenomenological consequences of ‘over-restoration’ in terms of perception: in the case of Polish film, my analytical focus is no longer on the examination of colour alone, but on the strange, ghostly visual effect of the striking postproduction, which almost completely erases the traces of the past.

Keywords

Colourization, digitalization, archival footage, documentary, memory

Bio

Kamilla Simor received her teaching degree from the University of Pécs in 2019. She is a PhD candidate at the University of Pécs, Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Sciences and an assistant lecturer of the Department of Film Science and Visual Studies. She is a member of the 'Affective Intermediality: Cinema between Media, Sensation and Reality' research team led by Dr. Ágnes Pethő at the Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania. Her research field is analysis of documentary films about the war from the perspective of genre theory, phenomenology and media theory.

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