



WHAT IS THE COLOR OF THE PAST? THE TRUTH OF THE ARCHIVE AND THE TRUTH OF SIMULATION

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ABSTRACT | Recently, the digital recoloring of black-and-white film has become a standard of historical documentation. Since the documented events originally took place in color, the argument goes, recoloring the images brings them closer to reality. Using the example of the French documentary film series *Apocalypse – la 2ème Guerre Mondiale*, a digital re-coloring of historical black-and-white footage, the article discusses the historiographical concepts behind this kind of simulation. Is digital recoloring an authentic and vivid animation of past events (as the authors of *Apocalypse claim*)? Or is it rather a questionable overwriting of archival material (as art historian Georges Didi-Huberman claims)? This article discusses various arguments for and against this technology of animation and ultimately takes the side of the critics: It is undeniable that every historical reconstruction is a subsequent interpretation. But shouldn't pictorial sources be left in their surviving visual integrity – as one would undoubtedly do with written documents? The historical archive is no tabula rasa. But changing the visual integrity of pictures is no reanimation of the “real”, but rather an erasure of historical material.

KEYWORDS | digital/digitized, historiography, media theory, recoloring, authenticity

The Promise of Color

The following text is part of the research project “The Digital Past – Facticity and Fiction in Visualizations of History,” carried out by Peter Geimer and Luca Beisel at the Freie Universität Berlin. The project studies the role of digital imaging in our understanding and imagination of past events and epochs. The focus lies on reconstructions that are ascribed with a documentary, factual character.

Beside the cinematic documentations addressed in this article by Peter Geimer, Luca Beisel studies the mediation of history in virtual reality exhibits. From animated dinosaurs to the reconstruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, VR technology is credited with facilitating a “look into the past” and provide a first-hand experience of history. The common question is what new forms of an understanding of history arise from digital reconstructions and simulations, especially from the promise of a new immediacy of history through immersion.

In September 2009, seventy years after the German invasion of Poland, French television showed the six-part film documentary *Apocalypse – La 2ème Guerre Mondiale*. Approximately six hundred hours of historical footage were viewed and edited into a six-hour documentary – from the Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg to the Allied landings

in Normandy and the ruins of Hiroshima. A soundtrack and a spoken commentary in 5.1 multichannel sound were added to the silent images, and Japanese composer Kenji Kawai provided the background music. *Apocalypse* gained its notoriety, however, primarily for its specific use of color. Thirty percent of the footage consists of historical color shots, i.e. film images shot in the 1940s using the Agfacolor or Technicolor process; the majority, on the other hand, was originally shot in black-and-white and has been recolored in the course of its digital remontage.

Since the images are viewed together, it is no longer possible to tell which parts of the historical material were originally black-and-white and which parts were in color. Also noteworthy is filmmakers Isabelle Clarke and Danielle Costelle's deliberate abandonment of some of the common standards of current television documentaries. In *Apocalypse* there are no reenactments of historical events as they have become common in the docu-drama genre – no scene re-enacted by actors is intended to break the integrity of the surviving footage. The film also refrains from interviewing contemporary witnesses, as has characterized the documentation of history on television since the 1980s – no testimony from the present should interrupt the historical flow of images. Finally, the filmmakers also forgo the presence of experts as they appear in numerous historical documentaries, usually in front of a filled wall of books, in order to lend the additional aura of scientific seriousness to what is shown.

So while on the one hand established standards of authentication are renounced in the name of the integrity of the surviving visual material, on the other hand the intervention is all the more decisive. "I give the images back their color," says François Montpellier, who was responsible for the digital processing of the historical photographs. The colorization was done "as close to reality as possible," he says. "People didn't live in black and white!"¹

"Giving the images their color back" – this sounds as if the colorfulness of the surviving recordings had been taken away in the mode of black and white; as if a parasitic instance had stepped between the reality of history and its cinematic representation, the distortions of which now had to be neutralized again. "During the Battle of Dunkirk in June 1940, the sky was of an oppressive spring blue" (Montpellier). This blue color, *Apocalypse* promises, is now returning to its historical place of origin after more than seven decades. The color was therefore not added to the images after the fact: somewhere under the layer of black and white, a reflection of that past sky blue seemed to have remained hidden, which has now been "returned" to the images – in a discreet act of restitution.

The claim of merely restoring a state where in fact they actually produce it has already been refuted by the filmmakers themselves through the documentation of their colorization techniques – in the DVD version of the film, for instance, through the Making Of. However, the traces of editing are also effortlessly visible in the pictures themselves. For the paleness of the added colors imitates the color scale of the faded Agfacolor and Technicolor films, with which the black-and-white footage was brought into line. After all, the colorized sequences were not adapted to the colors of a past reality – how could that be possible? Who could say what shade of blue the sky over Dunkirk had in June 1940? – but to the genuine colorfulness of the surviving film material. In this respect, the point of reference of *Apocalypse* is not the past reality of the Second World War, but the mode of appearance and state of preservation of visual artifacts. On the homepage of *ImaginColor*, run by François Montpellier, it says accordingly: "Extensive studies have been made to find out how the colors of the different film reels from different periods of the film have aged. Conversely, this allows us to reliably reconstruct time-related color distortions." What is reconstructed, then, is not the colorfulness of historical settings and events, but "time-related color distortions."²

Actualizing the Past? Or Fictionalizing the Archive?

According to French historian Michel de Certeau any historical discourse is dominated by absence. De Certeau reminds us that history cannot be reconstructed in its original state: historians are administrators of fragments, traces and remains. For de Certeau this unrepeatability of the past marks the unavoidable condition with which every serious study of history has to begin. De Certeau compares the historian to a clochard who assembles from fragments of waste the image of a world he will never enter.³ Strictly speaking, this does not restore the past; for him or her there is no going back to past factuality, no repetition, no merging of temporal horizons.

De Certeau argues as a scholar and a historian. However, the historiographical condition he describes should also be a challenge for authors of historical films – at least if they pursue a documentary claim and do not associate

the work with an explicitly fictitious approach to history. Instead of reflecting these conditions, the authors of *Apocalypse* focus on recreation, repetition and reanimation. Costelle and Clark, according to historian Thierry Bonzon, want to actualize the past, “eliminate the distance between the spectator and the past.” *Apocalypse* “is first and foremost a spectacle, which as such aims to adapt the visuals in the recycling to the modalities of current perception: by reproducing the images in high resolution, in 16/9 format and provided with 5.1 multichannel sound.”⁴ The colorization of historical images is part of this enterprise. According to the authors the war was experienced in color seventy years ago, so consequently the colorization of the images will guarantee a greater proximity to the historical events. “Color,” says Isabelle Costelle, “has brought the war from the past to the present.”⁵ At the same time, however, this attempt at a sensual visualization remains bound to the claim of unconditional truthfulness – as if even the individual after-experience still requires first and foremost the corroboration of facts. Accordingly, the authors invoke the authority of historical knowledge: “The colors have to be accurate, historians have worked on that. The uniforms of the Wehrmacht in winter are not the same as in summer. They changed over the course of the war. You have to show the wear and tear. For days we were looking for the shades of green of the color field gray.”⁶

Unlike docudrama and its procedures of reenactment or simulation of past events, *Apocalypse* presents itself in the tradition of documentary research. In the Making Of, which is included with the DVD version of the series, the authors find the formula for this claim: “100% archives.” The history of the Second World War is advertised here along the lines of a fruit juice manufacturer who promises one hundred percent direct juice for his product – without the addition of diluting substances: the one hundred percent content of historical factuality with no fictional admixtures. But how can this claim to reproduce and preserve the sources be reconciled with their simultaneous alteration through subsequent coloring? In the words of historian Robert Belot, the post-colorization of the historical black-and-white material corresponds to a fictionalization of the archive: “The colors want to make the reality of the war more accessible, while this editing actually has the effect of “fictionalizing” and thus derealizing this reality “ – as if this documentary wanted to escape its documentary status in order to approach that of fiction.”⁷ Belot’s critique goes beyond what has been said so far. By contrasting documentary and fiction, thinking about the colors of *Apocalypse* becomes a discourse on truth and fiction, historical reality and its “derealization.” In view of the colorful images of *Apocalypse*, then, must we speak of an attempt at deception, of lies and deceit?

A few days after the first episode of *Apocalypse* aired in France, Georges Didi-Huberman published a vehement critique of the series in the French daily *Libération*: “Images make history visible to us. They are crucial to understanding what has happened around us.”⁸ The fact that Didi-Huberman does not see this potential of images realized in *Apocalypse* can probably only be understood against the background of his reflections on the historical testimony of the photographic image, as he presented it in 2004 in *Images malgré tout*. An image acquires its value “solely through the position it occupies within a montage, in which, of course, other, selected images are added, but also words, thoughts, statements on history.”⁹ In the case of *Apocalypse*, however, the montage transforms the originally heterogeneous visual material into a visual unity. The story proceeds discontinuously and is captured from an endless number of perspectives. *Apocalypse*, on the other hand, replaces this discontinuity with an arrangement that tells the story from only one point of view and does not even name this point of view as such.

Didi-Huberman cites the recoloring of the images as a decisive means of this unification: “Coloring means adding another visible thing to a visible thing. It means, henceforth, to cover something of a surface, as any beauty product does.”¹⁰ What the authors of *Apocalypse* want to be understood as the restoration of an original reality, as the liberation of images from the deficient colorfulness of black and white, represents in Didi-Huberman’s eyes an act of substitution and replacement. The colorization does not find a tabula rasa, it covers up what exists and replaces one historically handed-down visibility with another. The colorization of the pictures is at the same time also a decolorization, the addition of color presupposes a disappearance of color, the making visible corresponds to making invisible.

Already in *Images malgré tout* Didi-Huberman’s criticism was directed at the editing of the photographs from Auschwitz, which were repeatedly reproduced in a retouched form. The attempt to make the historical photographs “more readable” in this way, he argued, rather marked a formal, historical, ethical, and ontological intervention. In his critique of postcoloring, Didi-Huberman draws on an old metaphor: “Coloring, a technique as old as the world, is nothing other than makeup: the application of a certain color to a ground prepared for that purpose.”¹¹

The metaphor of makeup comes from an ancient tradition of critique of concealment. Didi-Huberman's intervention acquires an ontological undertone: he distinguishes supplementary manipulation from an original, unvarnished truth, the "real traces of time" from the "bluff" of montage, from lies and deception: "This is how one makes the real traces of time on a face invisible – or even the images of history. The lie is not that images have been edited here, but in the claim to show us a naked and truthful face of war, where we are offered a made-up face, a bluff." It is not, then, the fact of intervention and manipulation that would be the object of criticism of *Apocalypse*. "It is precisely not a matter of purism: nothing here is pure and "pure," and every image is – from the moment it is taken – the result of a technical operation, of mediation, and thus of manipulation."¹² But what then is Didi-Huberman's critique of the "bluff" of montage based on, when at the same time he reminds us that every image is the result of a "mediation and thus a manipulation"? And if the colors in *Apocalypse* are an inauthentic ingredient – what unvarnished truth would emerge if the images were stripped of their colors again?

Various understandings of authenticity

In her discussion of Didi-Huberman's critique of *Apocalypse* (as well as a contribution I wrote on the same topic), philosopher Maria Muhle posed precisely this question. The criticism of the supposed realism of the post-colored images, she answers, seems for its part "to be based on an implicit claim to realism: For although no return to an impossible purism of the images is at issue, the manner of reconstruction, that is, the colorization undertaken in *Apocalypse*, is presented as highly objectionable."¹³ Muhle reminds us that criticism of the recoloring of historical black-and-white can easily take the form of a "naïve faith" – the belief "that the omission of manipulation promises the safeguarding of historical truth – be it ever so fragmentary." Its defenders, Muhle argues, give the black-and-white picture of history an aura of historical originality. In an exact reversal of this belief, Muhle concedes the higher cognitive value to the post-colored image. It achieves this value not through its greater closeness to reality, but through the fact that it obviously displays its artificiality. For "precisely the reenacting strategies – specifically: the post-colored images of the Second World War" evoke "*malgré eux* an alienation effect" that "allows greater insight into the problematic constitution of history than do the [black-and-white] images of a critical documentarism that ultimately runs the risk of reinforcing the belief in an undisturbed depictive relationship and closing off the process of historical representation."¹⁴ In other words: the more obvious the manipulation of images, the clearer the insight into the construction of history. And vice versa: the more discreet the artificial dressing of the images, the greater the danger of falling prey to the naïve belief in an undisturbed relationship of representation.

Muhle has brought a crucial twist to the discussion of *Apocalypse* by shifting attention to the level of images – their potential to create a counter-narrative. No matter what the authors of *Apocalypse* might say about the veracity of the visual reconstruction of history – the images work against it. Where Didi-Huberman accuses the untruthfulness of a montage that obscures a given visible with another visible, Muhle recognizes the truth of a montage that flaunts its own construction and artificiality and thus denies any claim to truthfulness: "What the colorful images of *Apocalypse* do, then, is to demonstrate the operation of the effects of reality and, in this sense, to think further about the questioning of the purism of images by making visible, in the manipulation of images, those techniques of representation that still sophisticated realists such as Geimer or Didi-Huberman, precisely, want to abridge in favor of the result of representation."¹⁵

What can the "sophisticated realists" answer to this? First of all, it is necessary to ask why the insistence on the black and white colorfulness of the pictures should be motivated by the "belief in an undisturbed relationship of representation." Why are the black-and-white archival images "mystifying because they lend evidence to the 'myth of reality' "?¹⁶ The reference to the historical black and white of the images is not a mystification, but describes first of all nothing else than the technical conditions under which these films were taken. Being black and white was a characteristic of the images, a historical given, which in itself does not include any instrumentalization by the "myth of reality." Their projection in black-and-white corresponded to the aesthetic expectation of the historical filmmakers – their awareness that the colored world before their eyes would be transformed into the scale of black-and-white.

It is precisely the diversity of the historical material – partly shot in color, partly in black-and-white – that would have offered the possibility of a reflection on the meaning and function of color. Its leveling erases the film's media signature. The black and white is part of the historicity of the images, part of their function as testimony, document, and historical trace. To change this condition is to change the archive, to overwrite what has been handed down in it. As Didi-Huberman rightly reminds us, this critique does not vote for documentary purism. It goes without saying that transmission is not a neutral process that would pass on the content of the sources untouched. Even if the metaphor of the "source" gives the impression "as if from this 'spring' the information of the past were bubbling up and flowing directly to us," through every interpretation "a certain perspective is already taken, the material is presorted, a certain aspect is emphasized, and the possibility of other points of view is excluded."¹⁷

Thus the images of history are also part of a tradition, a constant repetition and reinterpretation, a recycling that makes it impossible to find a place of origin where the images would still be completely "themselves." No one demands that films of the past be shown exclusively in historic movie theaters, accompanied by the rattling of projectors. The mere passing of time forces abstraction, each repetition puts the repeated into a new context. But does it follow from this that the images do not oppose their rededication, that they are empty containers of their later reuse? The historical archive is no tabula rasa. The critique of *Apocalypse* does not refer to the re-montage of the images, their right or wrong interpretation, but to the preservation of their material integrity. A source is also "a relic," a (so literally) 'remnant' from the past that should be taken seriously in its mediality and materiality." In his critique of *Apocalypse*, Didi-Huberman rather casually brought into play a term aimed at this kind of consideration: it is a matter of whether one "stifles the historical images" or "deals with them tactfully" ["étouffer les images ou bien les traiter avec tact"]. Dealing with what has been handed down would thus also be a question of tact, of the consideration of a posterity for what has been handed down to it. To "meet the images with tact" – that would mean to acknowledge their mediality and materiality. From this perspective, the digital recoloring of the images is neither the reclamation of a past, colorful reality [as the authors of *Apocalypse* see it] nor an involuntary enlightenment about the machinations of the historiographic "reality machinery" [as Maria Muhle sees it], but a staging intervention that takes away part of the images' historicity in the name of making them present.

With the colorization of the black-and-white images, according to Muhle, "a blocking moment is drawn into the sources" that "always reminds us of the uncertain status of historical documents." But doesn't one rather preserve the uncertain status of the sources by leaving them in their historical constitution? If, as Belot notes, the "pedagogical intention" of the montage is to "facilitate the attention of a generation to whom the era of black and white is unknown,"¹⁸ one can ask whether the unfamiliarity with historical black and white would not have been precisely a reason to leave it at the alienating appearance of the images? The strangeness of the past is not an obstacle, but a condition of its recognizability. As film historian Gertrud Koch puts it: "The idea of seeing something historically means being able to see something at a distance."¹⁹

NOTES

- ¹ François Montpellier, quoted by Marion Festraëts, in: Marion Festraëts, "Comment *Apocalypse* a redonné des couleurs à la guerre," *L'Express*, September 8, 2009, accessed March 1, 2021, url: http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/tele/comment-apocalypse-a-redonne-des-couleurs-a-la-guerre_784414.html. [All translations from French or German by the author.]
- ² ImaginColor, "Technique et Développements", last modified 2016, url: <http://www.imagincolor.com/la-technique/>.
- ³ Michel de Certeau, *Histoire et psychoanalyse: Entre science et fiction*. [Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1987], 189.
- ⁴ Thierry Bonzon, "Usages et mésusages des images d'archives dans la série *Apocalypse*," *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire* 107 (2010): 179.
- ⁵ Jürg Altwegg, "Im Gespräch: Isabelle Clarke und Daniel Costelle; Macht Farbe den Krieg verständlicher?" *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, March 13, 2010, 6.
- ⁶ Altwegg, "Im Gespräch: Isabelle Clarke und Daniel Costelle: Macht Farbe den Krieg verständlicher?," 6.
- ⁷ Robert Belot, "*Apocalypse*, un documentaire sur la Seconde Guerre mondiale," *Vingtième Siècle : Revue d'histoire* 107 (2010): 171.
- ⁸ Georges Didi-Huberman, "En mettre plein les yeux et rendre *Apocalypse* irregardable," *Libération*, September 22, 2009, accessed March 1, 2021, url: http://ecrans.liberation.fr/ecrans/2009/09/22/en-mettre-plein-les-yeux-et-rendre-apocalypse-irregardable_952332.
- ⁹ Didi-Huberman, "En mettre plein les yeux et rendre *Apocalypse* irregardable."
- ¹⁰ Didi-Huberman, "En mettre plein les yeux et rendre *Apocalypse* irregardable."

- ¹¹ Didi-Huberman, "En mettre plein les yeux et rendre Apocalypse irregardable."
- ¹² Didi-Huberman, "En mettre plein les yeux et rendre Apocalypse irregardable."
- ¹³ Maria Muhle, "Krieg in Farbe: Darstellung und Nachstellung," *Mittelweg* 36, no 2 (2015): 96.
- ¹⁴ Muhle, "Krieg in Farbe: Darstellung und Nachstellung," 85.
- ¹⁵ Muhle, "Krieg in Farbe: Darstellung und Nachstellung," 85.
- ¹⁶ Muhle, "Krieg in Farbe: Darstellung und Nachstellung," 85.
- ¹⁷ Achim Landwehr, *Die anwesende Abwesenheit der Vergangenheit: Essays zur Geschichtstheorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 2016), 58–59.
- ¹⁸ Belot, "Apocalypse, un documentaire sur la Seconde Guerre mondiale," 171.
- ¹⁹ Gertrud Koch, "Kracauers Theorie der Geschichte und des Films," in *Film und Geschichte: Produktion und Erfahrung von Geschichte durch Bewegtbild und Ton*, ed. Delia González de Reufels, Rasmus Greiner, and Winfried Pauleit (Berlin: Bertz und Fischer, 2015), 124.

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