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RECLAIMING HERITAGE: COLOURIZATION, CULTURE WARS AND THE POLITICS OF NOSTALGIA

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Abstract

This article considers the discursive continuities between a specifically liberal defence of cultural patrimony, evident in the debate over film colourization, and the culture war critique associated with neo-conservatism. It examines how a rhetoric of nostalgia, linked to particular ideas of authenticity, canonicity and tradition, has been mobilized by the right *and* the left in attempts to stabilize the configuration and perceived transmission of American cultural identity. While different in scale, colourization and multiculturalism were seen to create respective (postmodern) barbarisms against which defenders of culture, heritage and good taste could unite. I argue that in its defence of the 'classic' work of art, together with principles of aesthetic distinction and the value of cultural inheritance, the anti-colourization lobby helped enrich and legitimize a discourse of tradition that, at the end of the 1980s, was beginning to reverberate powerfully in the conservative challenge to a 'crisis' within higher education and the humanities. This article attempts to complicate the contemporary politics of nostalgia, showing how a defence of cultural patrimony has distinguished major *and* minor culture wars, engaging left and right quite differently but with similar presuppositions.

IN THE LATE 1980s, a skirmish broke out over the issue of film colourization, a culture war of a particular sort. The brouhaha began in March 1986 when Ted Turner bought MGM Entertainment and swiftly announced a plan to

convert to colour twenty-four films in his new back catalogue. As an economic venture, colourization would give new profit potential to films that had lost their market viability through age and the visual hindrance of their being in black and white. Proponents of colour conversion like Turner and the Hal Roach Company, which helped develop the conversion process, argued that technological enhancement would represent nothing short of 'the rebirth of the film classics of yesteryear' (quoted in Edelman, 1986: 56). Opponents were less sanguine about the virtues of colourization, bodies like the American Film Institute and the Directors Guild of America, and figures such as Woody Allen and John Huston, denouncing the process as a threat to the originality of the art-work and the moral rights of the creator. The colourization debate set art against commerce, creative rights against ownership, monochrome against the dastard colour of money. Fought in the media and then in court, it raised questions about intellectual property, but also, and significantly, authenticity and cultural heritage.

At the same time as the colourization fracas, another more pernicious culture war was beginning to unfold. In 1987, Allan Bloom published *The Closing of the American Mind*, a conservative jeremiad on higher education that would set the tone for a proliferating number of right-wing broadsides against the legacy of 1960s radicalism in American universities and the development of an invidious new relativism. From William Bennett (1984) to Roger Kimball (1991), a crisis was being defined, 'tenured radicals' conspiring to politicize knowledge, undermine the great books of literature, and to threaten core values, liberal education and Western civilization generally. As with colourization, the preservation of cultural heritage, or what Bennett would call reclaiming a legacy, became central to the barbed conflicts over educational standards and the challenge of multiculturalism.

The colourization debate and the conflict over higher education have very different political stakes. If the former is a question of personal property in relation to moral rights and popular memory, the latter is a far more significant issue concerning the status of the university, the circulation of knowledge, and the representation of peoples and identities within what counts as legitimate knowledge and culture. One became a minor issue that had snuffed itself out by 1989, while the other became a defining controversy that would burn through the 1990s, creating with it the smoke and bluster of 'political correctness'. Colourization and multiculturalism are different in scope and scale, but they reveal similarities in the way they were and are defined in public discourse. Narratives of decline have been mobilized in each case, focusing upon the stability of tradition as it relates to the configuration and perceived transmission of American cultural identity. If colourization and multiculturalism can be examined together, a significant basis for comparison is perhaps their mutual disrespect for the preserves of cultural tradition. More specifically, they (are seen to) disrupt a certain concept of tradition grounding particular ideas about educational practice and the popular circulation of cultural texts. At the end of the 1980s, the

process of colourizing film and the politics of 'colourizing' the curriculum induced a sense of discontinuity which gave nostalgia a concerted rhetorical currency within American cultural politics.

Nostalgia is often thought to have an intrinsically conservative bias. It represents a plea for continuity in times of uncertainty and change; the rhetoric of nostalgia posits a decline and then appeals to a more authentic and politically serviceable golden age. The nostalgics of the culture war are most readily observed on the right, typified by Allan Bloom and his requiem for cultural authority and the 'great books'. While nostalgia may underscore the polemical tone of much conservative criticism, this does not limit the extent to which its rhetorical strategies have been engaged across the political spectrum. The left has developed its own narratives of decline in battles fought over multiculturalism. This has focused upon the baleful emergence of academic theory and the parochial nature of identity politics, what Todd Gitlin calls a 'grim and hermetic bravado celebrating victimization and stylized marginality' (1995a: 311). Beset by cant and cosmetic political triumphs, liberal critics like Gitlin (1995b), Russell Jacoby (1987) and Robert Hughes (1993) chastise the shallow politics of a beleaguered left that now fights politics from the library, protests by means of abstract theory, cannot build majorities and sees political action in the confines of curricular revision.[1]

A politics of nostalgia can emerge from multiple, not simply reactionary, conceptions of loss; it has been developed by factions of the right *and* the left (Tannock, 1995). On occasion, this has produced some intriguing parallels that cross the political divide. My interest in the colourization debate stems from the character of nostalgia it engendered among ranks of the liberal-left and the discursive continuities this revealed with key tenets of neo-conservative critique. Colourization gave rise to a liberal nostalgia that understood loss in terms of threatened cultural patrimony. The status of the 'classic' text, the principles of aesthetic distinction, and the importance of cultural inheritance all became points of issue for a liberal lobby seeking to fend off the deleterious encroachments of commerce in the cultural sphere. In many respects, the anti-colourization camp trafficked in what Joan Wallach Scott (1995) has called the 'fetishizing of tradition' in contemporary discourse. Scott associates this with conservative endeavours to shore up the 'integrity' of American identity (and its structures of privilege) against multicultural discordance. The discourse of tradition has also been mobilized and refined by the left, however. The colourization debate complicates the discursive 'territories' of left and right, joining rather curiously the likes of Woody Allen and Allan Bloom, Martin Scorsese and George Will, in a common defence of heritage and cultural transmission.

The colourization debate set liberal artisan guilds, film organizations, critics, directors and Democrat Senators against the powerful economic interests of Turner Broadcasting Systems, CBS/Fox, Hal Roach Studios, Colorization Inc. and Color Systems Technology. In framing their opposition to the conversion

process, many liberal voices rushed to the defence of the classic work; they justi-fied the policing of taste against commercial opportunism and the vulgarities of consumer preference; they sought to counter the debilitating effects of post-modern technology and its digital manipulation of the visual image. These were similar, however, to the terms being deployed by the conservative assault on multiculturalism as it developed in the same cultural moment. Right-wing critics abhorred the attack on classic works of literature; arguments were made about the onset of ignorance and superficiality with the 'politicization' of the humani-ties; conservatives sought to challenge postmodern theory and its corrosive impact on sense, clarity and standards of value. Colourization and multicultural-ism created respective barbarisms against which defenders of culture, heritage and good taste could unite. The significant difference between the two debates was the axis determining from where exactly a rhetoric of nostalgia, linked to particular notions of authenticity, was being voiced. Colourization was fought with rhetorical grapeshot compared with the heavy weapons wheeled out for the battles over multiculturalism. I want to consider how both debates nevertheless revealed a similar resistance, in a comparable language, to challenges made upon the 'fixity' of tradition, the stability of artistic canons, and the formation of American cultural identity.

Colourization

Michael Bérubé has said that: 'postmodernism's politics will be a struggle for control – not over the means of production, but over the means of *replication*' (1994: 127). This speaks, in part, of the licensed re-privatization of culture, where capitalist energies enforce laws of copyright and ownership within areas that are, or should be, public. Colourization is one such example. Both the Hal Roach Studios and Turner Broadcasting saw the opportunity to forge new copy-rights for old works through techniques of colour conversion. Adding colour, it was hoped, would be recognized as 'new creativity' by the Copyright Office (which it was in 1987), colourized films therefore becoming an 'original work of authorship'. Ted Turner sought to maximize the profit potential of works he already owned by securing copyrights for them as new commodities. This had the effect of creating private property out of an ostensibly public resource. While opponents tried moving the issue on to moral grounds – namely, was colouriza-tion a breach of the moral rights of the original creators? – there was short legal mileage to be gained from this argument. In 1988, President Reagan signed legis-lation for America to become party to the Berne Convention, an agreement for the protection of literary and artistic works, but with a provision which effec-tively meant that moral rights would not be recognized in America. Colouriza-tion was a legal victory for owners above artists, a triumph for those holding property rights and a digital paintbrush.

Colour conversion was first and foremost about money. As Ted Turner explains: 'Movies were made to be profitable. They were not made as art, they were made to make money . . . anything that could make more money has always been considered to be OK' (quoted in Dawson, 1989: 39). The vehicle and medium for the colourized film was television; profit would be made through syndication and video release. In 1986, Turner announced that he would market a series of colour-converted films on a barter basis, including *Yankee Doodle Dandee, White Heat, High Sierra, Father of the Bride, Dark Victory* and *The Maltese Falcon*. These were sold to television stations as part of the Color Classic Network. By 1987, the Vice-president of marketing for Turner Broadcasting, David Copp, reported that eighty-five stations had decided to participate in the network, earning the company substantial revenues. For example, two colourized Errol Flynn movies (*Captain Blood* and *Sea Hawk*) grossed $800,000 in less than a year. In black and white, these had earned only $200,000 apiece. It was difficult to anticipate the failure of colourization from the initial furore that it caused.

Charles R. Acland suggests, rightly in my opinion, that it is not colour that attracts audiences but the very fact of colourization, 'the spectacle of the re-finished product, a creation of technological wizardry' (1990: 15). He argues that 'people are intrigued by the seemingly profane reworking of definitive moments in their collective cultural history'. There is perhaps a curiosity in digital alter-ation, of seeing a film artfully doctored in the name of creating what Acland calls the 'new classic'. The fact that colourization failed to establish itself, that demand was eventually low and companies lost millions in the gamble, may illustrate the momentary fascination. Colourization became a fad, a short-lived exercise that expired with the public's waning interest. By 1994, the *New York Times* wrote that 'the mad dash to colorize classic black-and-white movies appears to be over' (Carter, 1994: 10). With cable channels like American Movie Classics and The Nostalgia Network showing a host of black and white 'oldies', and with the new marketability of *monochrome* memory, Ted Turner closed down his operations. For all its wizardry, colourization became little more than a digitally inspired novelty.

What interests me is less the fact that colourization failed in popular, if not in legal, terms, but the manner in which it rallied opposition. While the debate was principally waged over rights – ownership versus the moral entitlements of the creator – the rhetoric of the conflict focused upon a few central themes. Prominent among them were those of authenticity, canonicity and cultural her-itage. Notions of originality and authenticity have been problematized in a climate where cultural production has become ever more hybrid, intertextual and digitally reproduced.[2] Authenticity remains a powerful cultural category, however, evident in the colourization debate. Opponents decried the process of colour conversion as a 'desecration' of the art-work (Martin Scorsese), a 'muti-lation' (Woody Allen), an impropriety not unlike 'robbing a grave' (Robert Redford). The Directors Guild of America called colour conversion 'cultural

butchery'. Colourization was portrayed as an encroachment on the rights of the creator but moral arguments were often linked to an idea of the authentic, that is to say black-and-white, work of art.

Authenticity is conceptually linked to the idea and possibility of fraud (Orvell, 1989). Exactly how fraudulent the colourized film is or can be said to be was basic to the legal and aesthetic debates that governed the issue of colour conversion within public discourse. There were two main areas of discussion. The aesthetic debate questioned the grounds on which colourization was (im)moral (*should it be done?*) and the legal debate questioned the grounds on which colourization was (il)legal (*can it be done?*). There is considerable overlap between the two, for, as I have said, legal arguments were fought in terms of moral rights. The concept of authenticity was framed somewhat differently in each case, however. While the legal debate contested the degree of control a film-maker could expect to have over his or her original (authentic) work, the aesthetic debate focused more upon the formal properties of black and white in defining a work's very originality (authenticity).

Flo Leibowitz (1991) argues that black and white can affect the entire mood of a film; monochrome performs expressive work in its own right. A monochrome movie is not simply a film without colour but has a tonal quality that is often used quite deliberately in genres like film noir (Naremore, 1998). Black and white has developed specific connotations in different moments of film history. It has become more recently associated with a general sense of pastness, however, linked significantly to ideas of the film 'classic'. By digitally reinterpreting a monochrome movie, colourization was seen by many to effect a film's mood and feel, but also its period status within cinematic history. To the groups and guilds who opposed the process, colourization was a crude economic venture exploiting the potential vulgarities of public taste, but something which also upset notions of film classicism that were joined to particular ideas of cultural patrimony.

The black-and-white 'classic' became a fulcrum of the colourization debate, giving rise to the issue of cinematic canons. Episodes of *Gilligan's Island* could be colourized, but God forbid anyone should touch *Citizen Kane*. It was the digital threat to an assemblage of perceivable 'classics' that inspired legal initiatives. In 1988, Congress sanctioned the creation of the National Film Preservation Board under the auspices of the Library of Congress. This was a board of thirteen people who, in 1990, began considering a list of 1,500 films nominated by the public for selection as cinematic landmarks. Twenty-five titles would be chosen each year, the Library of Congress requiring the copyright owner to submit a high-quality print or negative to its archive and obliging colourized versions to be acknowledged. The National Film Preservation Board was the result of Senate hearings which, examining colourization as an issue of moral rights, were reluctant to follow France, Germany and Italy and establish concrete legal protections for artists as well as owners.[3] As a compromise, the hearings decreed that a

limited number of films that were 'culturally, historically and aesthetically sig-
nificant' should be included in a National Film Registry. These films would not
be exempt from alteration but videocassettes would carry a sticker on the front
acknowledging the fact *of* alteration. It was a limited victory for the anti-
colourization lobby, but interesting in what it revealed about the role of govern-
ment in preserving 'classic' works of art, and the stakes fought over the cultural
transmission of canonical artefacts and the particular histories they designate.

   One of the arguments used by opponents of colour conversion was the
effect it would have on heritage, memory and national identity. John Huston
denounced colourization, saying that 'it would almost seem as though a con-
spiracy exists to degrade our national character' (quoted in Klawans, 1990:
165). Bonita Granville Wrather, chairperson of the American Film Institute,
said that colouring 'will destroy our national film history and the rich heritage
which it represents' (quoted in Linfield, 1987: 35). Although master copies of
original films are always left intact after colour conversion and may even be
better preserved, this fact was thought to be insignificant while a powerful
entertainment industry controls distribution, circulation and access. With time,
it was argued, a colourized film would replace the original version in the public
memory. Works of art would be replaced by inferior commercial spectacles.
This would have severe consequences for any real understanding of film history
and cinematic tradition.

   It was in this context that Congress published findings that led to the cre-
ation of the National Film Preservation Board. One link between colourization
and multiculturalism is that concerning the role of government in upholding
standards and values within a notional cultural policy. This would become a hotly
contested issue in the war over political correctness, focusing upon the level of
public funding (administered by the National Endowment for the Arts and
Humanities) given famously to artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres
Serrano. While the standards in this case were moral – should the government
sponsor work that is 'pornographic' and 'anti-Christian'? – and were, in fact,
linked to Republican efforts to cut the NEA budget, the standards upheld by the
colourization ruling were, one might say, memorial. Government took steps to
articulate a concept of heritage through its commitment, however empty it may
have been in practical terms, to 'classic' film.

   The threat posed to the cultural transmission of heritage has become a key
issue in American cultural politics. Colourization disturbed conventions of
memory by visually reinterpreting artefacts of film history. Unlike the historical
revisions within recent museum and academic discourse, colourization had pecu-
niary rather than political motivations.[4] Similar issues about historical represen-
tation were at stake, however, and similar complaints were made against the
perception of sacrilegious tampering. Compare these statements by John Huston,
addressing the US Congress on the issue of colour conversion in 1987, and
George Will, writing in *Newsweek* about political correctness.

> We are all custodians of our culture. Our culture defines not who we are but who and what we were. Those of us who have labored a lifetime to create a body of work look to you for the preservation of that work in the form we chose to make it. I believe we have that right.
>
> John Huston (quoted in Lee, 1991: 112)

> The transmission of the culture that unites, even defines America – transmission through knowledge of literature and history – is faltering. The result is collective amnesia and deculturation. That prefigures social disintegration, which is the political goal of the victim revolution that is sweeping campuses.
>
> George Will (1991: 72)

Both examples invoke a threatened tradition integral to conceptions of American identity and culture. If the colourization debate illustrates some of the rhetorical tropes utilized in new right attacks on multiculturalism, the main agent of 'deculturation' for the anti-colourization lobby was never a tenured radical or member of the loony left but Ted Turner (hardly a radical even if he is married to Jane Fonda). From the mid-1980s, a defence began to mount in two different areas of cultural life and from different political positions, a discourse of tradition seeking to enclose and protect cultural heritage from insidious, or at best self-serving, corporate and pedagogical interlopers.

Heritage is a capacious term and battles fought in its name reveal different political constellations and commitments. The rhetorical *defence* of heritage in the culture war has been waged on certain terms. It has become less a question of material preservation than a matter of defending specific histories inscribed in cultural texts. Stuart Klawans (1990) notes that one of the ironies of colourization was that Ted Turner spent more money and did more to preserve film heritage by storing and making safe fragile nitrate-based film stock than any federal effort to do the same. Heritage has become an issue more often fought over questions of representation, over continuities of knowledge that shape and inform a particular sense of cultural identity. It is the discursive continuities between anti-colourization and opposition to multiculturalism, evident in this fight, that I now want briefly to consider.

Multiculturalism

'Colorization represents the mutilation of history, the vandalism of our common past, not merely as it relates to film, but as it affects society's perception of itself' (quoted in Wagner, 1989: 645). So read a committee letter by the Directors Guild of America, submitted at the Senate hearings on moral rights. The tone here could be mistaken for that levelled against Afrocentrism and the 'cult of

ethnicity' in the work of a critic such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. In 1991, Schlesinger published *The Disuniting of America*, a bestseller that delivered a prognosis on the 'new ethnic gospel' being instilled through education and the teaching of history. This was a book which, as Michael Bérubé (1994) suggests, performed important cultural work in delegitimizing multiculturalism. It is not my purpose to examine Schlesinger but he does illustrate similar discursive ground occupied by the anti-colourization lobby in its concern with historical mutilations and vandalism. Lamenting the use of education to build self-esteem in minority groups, he argues that history should not be tampered with in the service of cultural therapy. How else but through the invocation of history, he suggests, 'can a people establish the legitimacy of its personality, the continuity of its tradition, the correctness of its course?' (1991: 48). The colourization debate never entertained the polemics of (ethnic) difference, but it did raise issues of pedagogy and historical transmission that were being expressed in the conflict over multiculturalism.

If we are to be precise, colourization was more about taste than pedagogy defined in any institutional sense; the anti-colourization lobby tried to police standards of value for those impressionable souls unable to distinguish between monochrome quality and colourized trash. Distinctions were made between authenticity and fraud, heritage and heresy. A similar regulatory premise underwrites *The Closing of the American Mind*. Allan Bloom's Arnoldian sense of cultural tradition seeks to preserve distinctions between high and low culture in the perpetuation of a discernible (Western) cultural heritage. He suggests that 'for Americans the works of the great writers could be the bright sunlit uplands where they could find the outside, the authentic liberation for which this essay is a plea' (1987: 48). Authenticity is a byword for *true* cultural value; it is basic to a critique that decries superficiality, ignorance, fakers and those who no doubt traffic in postmodern theory.

I suggested earlier that colourization and multiculturalism both created barbarisms against which defenders of culture, heritage and good taste could unite. In each case, this barbarism is an expression of effects which might usefully be called postmodern. In the case of colourization, the conversion process is enabled by digital technologies that allow the film image to be altered in ways that previous techniques of tinting and toning could never achieve. Colourization was seen to create a simulacrum of the classic film, undermining authenticity and tampering with tradition. In the multicultural debate, postmodern theory became a perceivable menace to originality and heritage, classic works of literature coming under the relativist cosh. While a complex movement with diverse political investments, multiculturalism was relentlessly stigmatized in public discourse and by the media press. Reflecting upon the culture wars at the end of the 1990s, Frederick Buell writes: ' "multiculturalism" was repeatedly spoken of as a singular, easily-labeled position, one that amounted to 1) separatism and 2) cultural relativism' (1998: 555). The 'barbarism' attached to multiculturalism

was a particular conflation of these two elements. The questions that the multi-cultural movement posed to the stability of artistic canons (namely, the concept of common culture) was linked, and often confused, with an assault on the the very status of nationhood (the concept of common society). I realize that I am using the word 'multiculturalism' without accounting for its ubiquitous use and meaning in social and cultural discourse (Gordon and Newfield, 1996). However, its conceptual and political diversity was never something its detractors were careful to preserve. If the 'barbarism' of multiculturalism can be compared with that of colourization, it is on the grounds that each were seen to fundamentally disturb the relationship between cultural canonicity and national identity.

Tropes of universal worth and timeless value can be witnessed in both debates. George Lucas said at the Senate hearings that technological advances 'will alter, mutilate and destroy for future generations the subtle human truths and higher human feelings that talented individuals within our society have created' (quoted in Wagner, 1989: 645). This implies an idea of cultural uplift (higher feelings) in works that transmit enduring values (subtle truths). It is reminiscent of the bright sunlit uplands that Bloom finds in the great writers, those talented individuals of the literary world. In each debate, the status of the 'classic' text was at stake, undermined by digital reproduction and left-wing 'politiciza-tion', respectively. In different ways, opponents of multiculturalism and colourization saw the ritual sacrifice of aesthetic and cultural standards in ill-considered attempts to accommodate injured visual and/or political sensibilities.

This 'accommodation' was seen to have a powerful commercial dimension. Colourization was clear evidence to its critics of the vulgarities of the marketplace, corporate impresarios out to make a ready buck through the base exploitation of (a created) consumer fancy. Colourization was seen as an expression of impersonal market forces, global magnates seeking to extend their command over lucrative new markets. Ted Turner was no cultural patron but, as *American Film* (1989) literally pictured him, a dangerous 'raider of the last archive'.[5] The market-based challenge to aesthetic value and cultural heritage also distinguished conservative complaints about multiculturalism within education. Academics, it was thought, were becoming self-aggrandizing careerists; disciplines like cultural studies were emerging as lucrative cottage industries; the university was succumbing to a new consumerism less concerned with maintaining the 'autonomy of knowledge' than show-casing a graduating roster of satisfied customers. Within a broad context, these kinds of criticism can be seen as a response to what Arjun Appadurai (1990) has called the 'global cultural economy'. They are a reaction to the substantial weakening of national patrimony in a time when the transnational flow of persons, technologies, finance, information and ideology has both undermined local tradition and transformed the social function of the university as it was linked to ideas of national culture and the destiny of the nation state (Readings, 1996).

Placing the colourization debate alongside battles fought over multicultural-ism is not as gratuitous as it may at first appear. There are common themes in

both conflicts despite their difference in political scale. The stability of tradition, the need to maintain aesthetic value, the preservation of authenticity against fakery, the impositions of the marketplace, and the continuities of cultural and historical transmission, these were all basic to liberal opposition to colourization and conservative opposition to multiculturalism. I do not want to bludgeon the similarities between quite different types of culture war, but each debate was distinguished by a narrative of decline. Nostalgia became an idiom of cultural complaint for the left as much as the right, an undertone extending itself in debates that, while separate, emerged in the same cultural moment. Colourization may have been local and slight compared with multiculturalism, which has become embracing and pivotal, but the discourse opposing them both was energized and thickened by a concept of loss advanced by conservatives *and* liberals. While fighting different enemies – left-wing 'thought police' and big business – each used similar basic terms. Cultural manifestations in education and popular culture, call them postmodern if you like, were seen to undermine the systems of meaning that give order and unity to American tradition and, with it, cultural identity.

Nostalgia

If nostalgia is defined as a yearning for the past in response to a loss, absence or discontinuity felt in the present, conservatives like Allan Bloom, Roger Kimball and Dinesh D'Souza engaged a rhetoric that cast multiculturalism as a new fundamentalism. With it supposedly came the loss of tradition in the venal search for oppression, the absence of cultural value with the politicization of the humanities, and a break with communality with the new obsession with difference. A rhetoric of nostalgia developed, glorifying a past where the lunacy and totalitarianism of 'political correctness' was ineffectual, and where cultural values (those of white male privilege) were seen to be more secure. In comparing multiculturalism and colourization, I have so far suggested that similar rhetorical modes were marshalled in quite different debates. My point, in making the connection, is about the development of a particular common sense in American culture. I want to demonstrate the hegemonic battles for cultural authority waged by right and left over the guardianship of taste and the protection of tradition.

The allure of nostalgia became an emotive issue in the late 1980s and early 1990s that cut across conventional political demarcations. This was a result of new tendencies in postmodern culture rejecting the meanings and identities inscribed within traditional regimes of knowledge, reconstructing the work of art in an age of digital reproduction, and disrupting crucial distinctions between depth and surface, high and popular culture, authenticity and artifice. Put under pressure were certitudes of taste, value and cultural identity. The panic that

ensued expressed itself in various forms but significant for both liberals and conservatives was the critical affirmation of a stable, authentic, heritage inscribed within 'legitimate' forms of cultural representation. At stake here is the policing of cultural distinction. More specifically, it illustrates how intellectuals and taste makers of the left and right have mutually conceived the public as cultural dupes, in danger of being cretinized without the proper recognition and regulation of 'timeless' cultural value. Nostalgia was rhetorically embroiled in attempts to, in some sense, 'reclaim' consensual cultural heritage, rescuing the stupified public from both cultural fragmentation and their own ignorance.

The colourization debate was arguably structured by two forms of nostalgia, buried within the legal contestation of moral rights: a nostalgia for authenticity and the value attached to authentic nostalgia. Nostalgia for authenticity comes in a cultural moment when authorship and originality have been profoundly challenged by the capacity of new technologies to refigure cultural texts (Collins, 1995). Colourized movies were akin to the generation of (retro) films that Baudrillard has described as being 'to those one knew what the android is to man: marvelous artifacts, without weakness, pleasing simulacra that lack only the imaginary, and the hallucination inherent to cinema' (1994: 45). The callous disregard for the original text in the colourization process was seen to have grave implications for heritage and popular memory. Amnesia is one of the much discussed symptoms of postmodernity. A culture of surface and simulation supposedly threatens depth of historical understanding; the speed and style of media imagery creates a 'presentness' that obscures any meaningful relationship with the past. Andreas Huyssen (1995) has asked what a postmodern memory would look like in a world where the technological media affect the way we perceive and live our temporality. For those suspicious of meddlesome digital effects it would no doubt look very much like a colourized film – false, crude and not sufficiently authentic.

The colourized film is a digital product of algorithms stored in computer memory. Some would say that, in being simultaneously of the past *and* the present, a colourized movie destroys the visual pastness that might register a film more obviously within cultural memory. The idea of 'authentic nostalgia' reacts to the oxymoronic concept of the 'new classic', and to fear that memory is being short-changed in the reign of postmodern simulacra. This corresponds with Fredric Jameson's (1991) anxiety about the profound waning or blockage of historicity in postmodernism. In a culture distinguished by the 'spatial logic of the simulacrum', he argues that historicity has been replaced by a new aesthetic 'nostalgia mode'. This describes an art language where the past is realized through stylistic connotation and consumed as pastiche. Symptomatic of a crisis in the postmodern historical imagination, the nostalgia mode satisfies a desperate craving for history, while reinforcing the past as 'a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum' (Jameson, 1991: 18). For Jameson, the historical past has been replaced by stylized and glossy pastness; the simulations

of the nostalgia mode have enfeebled the experience of a properly existential nostalgia mood.

Jameson appeals, much like the anti-colourization lobby, to a conceptually authentic apprehension of the past. This fails to account for the new forms of narrativity that have developed in a heavily mediated and media sophisticated culture, however. The recycling, hybridizing, and even colourizing, of past styles need not prefigure a postmodern 'crisis of historicity' but may instead suggest a conscious rearticulation of the past. This follows Linda Hutcheon's argument that postmodernism 'does not deny the existence of the past; it does question whether we can *know* that past other than through its textualized remains' (1987: 25). Lamenting the depthless simulacra of late capitalism, Jameson gives little sense that meaningful narratives of cultural memory can be produced *through* the narrative techniques and stylized forms of the 'nostalgia mode'. Like the 'nostalgia film' that Jameson famously treats, colourized movies would only provide further evidence of what he suggests to be an incumbent memory crisis, a paralysis in 'our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way' (1991: 21).

In contradistinction to the liberal and postmodern doomsayers, proponents of colourization argued that digital technology would give new life to old films. Ted Turner believed that the 'new classic' would maintain memory in alternative, more contemporary forms. His defence was not made on representational grounds but was couched in a populist rhetoric, affirming that 'consumers have voted – they like it' (quoted in Dawson, 1989: 39). This kind of market endorsement did not stem the fears of the anti-colourization lobby, however. The 'sugar-water' of colourization, as John Huston put it, only proved that the public were lacking in the critical capacities that might safeguard the chords of cultural memory. 'Authentic nostalgia' was valued against the spectre of postmodern forgetting. As a concept, it underwrote liberal-left complaints about the ahistorical experience of the colourized film, a crude cinematic spectacle caught symptomatically between the very words 'new' and 'classic'.

The Culture War

The anti-colourization campaign set out to resist postmodern configurations of cultural transmission whereby artefacts of history can be digitally altered and made to circulate in ways that undermine conceptions of authorship, originality and fixed tradition. The debate over multiculturalism, while more varied, consequential and generating higher degrees of political venom, raised similar issues. This was notable in what conservatives saw as the crumbling foundations of Western cultural heritage in higher education and the humanities. It has not been my intention either to condone or condemn colourization. Instead, I have sought to illustrate some of the discursive continuities between two debates that

emerged in the same cultural moment and engaged left and right quite differently but with similar presuppositions. In each case, narratives of decline were mobilized, barbarians identified, and tradition sanctified.

I have distinguished the anti-colourization lobby as liberal, but this shouldn't imply that conservatives were, by implication, *for* the whole process. Considering the regimes of taste that organize and structure symbolic domination in the cultural field, Andrew Ross has discussed a mutual distrust on the left and the right concerning 'new technologies and the monstrous mass cultures to which they give birth' (1989: 209). Colourization was a new digital technology sponsored by corporate finance; the 'new classic' was industrially produced to make profit, a cultural form that for many compromised the borders of legitimate taste and fostered the idiocy of its popular audience. As a cultural and aesthetic issue, colourization received condemnation from left and right alike. It was in terms of ownership and property rights that colourization became more specifically mapped as a liberal/Democrat crusade. Even the black-and-white film star Ronald Reagan could not, in his new role as President, be moved to intervene and save the monochrome classic if it meant doing so at the expense of business principles and copyright law.

My interest in this article has been the means by which liberal criticism of colourization arguably helped to strengthen the legitimacy of right-wing discourse in its fetishizing of 'traditional' knowledge and culture. Authenticity, canonicity and tradition became vital to right-wing rhetoric in its attack on superficiality, ignorance and politicization within American universities. These same terms were also used by the anti-colourization lobby, however. Before multiculturalism ever became a national issue, but in the same moment that conservatives were gathering steam, the defence of cultural heritage was being fought by right *and* left.

At the end of the 1980s, nostalgia developed a polemical currency in two separate debates. In each case this was linked to issues of value, taste and cultural patrimony. Opposition to both colourization and multiculturalism has been, in part, the result of technological and intellectual transformations that have disturbed values and identities inscribed in a selection of 'untouchable' texts. By rehearsing a particular common sense about the preservation of heritage and the status of the classic, the anti-colourization campaign fortified principles of cultural authority threatened by new postmodern connections between art, evaluation, education and the archive. I would argue that in their rhetorical nostalgia for the work of art and consensual cultural heritage, the liberal-left helped articulate themes that would reverberate powerfully in right-wing bromides against the 'therapeutic' and 'separatist' tendencies of multiculturalism. Effectively, the anti-colourization lobby enriched a discourse that advanced the vitality of traditional knowledge, the value of aesthetic taste, and the virtue of cultural inheritance, a discourse that would be developed, defined and deployed strategically in the hegemonic 'war of positions' waged to control the terms of the multicultural debate.

A politics of nostalgia is commonly associated with conservative critique. This can understate, however, the degree to which it has shaped liberal anxieties about a jeopardized cultural heritage. The threat to historical transmission, whether by tenured radical or corporate parvenu, has been met with resistance in major *and* minor culture wars, producing oppositional configurations with a shared investment in principles of authenticity, historical continuity and consensual heritage. A rhetoric has developed *across political lines* roping off and defending versions of cultural patrimony. This may feed different debates with different discursive histories – namely, the critique of new technology and the contested function of the university – but in the late 1980s concerns sharpened, for liberals and for conservatives, upon a similar basic fear: the dawning possibility that in being exposed to odious forms of PC (popular culture, political correctness, postmodern critique), American students and consumers were becoming, to use a politically correct argot, 'culturally challenged'.

Critics from Todd Gitlin (1995b) to Nikhal Pal Singh (1998) have discussed the origins and context of the culture wars shaping public discourse in the 1990s. Although providing different political interpretations, they both point to the political and economic, as well as specifically cultural, histories informing the struggles over multiculturalism. The culture wars were but a single, if symbolic and politically pregnant, manifestation of a much broader sense of national identity crisis brought about by factors such as the end of the cold war and the more sustained effects of globalization. While the culture war debates have in some sense run their course, including the jeremiads on the compromised nature of American tradition, the need to articulate a coherent sense of nation and national memory remains. If postmodernity is characterized by 'institutionalized pluralism, variety, contingency and ambivalence', as Zygmunt Bauman (1992) suggests, protective strategies have been engaged, across a variety of cultural discourses, to articulate a purified national essence. In a time when national identity is being undermined by transnational political and economic restructuring; when ideas of national commonality are being challenged by an emergent politics of difference; and when the metanarratives of memory are straining for legitimacy against the multiple pasts of the marginalized, the desire to stabilize the configuration and perceived transmission of American cultural identity continues to be a defining aspect of hegemonic memory politics.

Notes

1   There are interests at stake with any sense of loss. Gitlin has been accused of nostalgia by critics who point to his own threatened authority as a white male politico, someone who resists the challenge made by a new generation of academics and who can afford to disclaim identity politics because there is little personally at stake. Gitlin denies the charge of nostalgia, suggesting there is no

golden age to which he aspires or seeks to recover. This does not explain away the narrative of decline in his work, however, figured around the waning political capacities of an effective left. In many ways, Gitlin issues a rhetorical nostalgia for the *spirit* of change that once marked the early new left.

2   Digital imaging, in particular, has altered the representational 'truth' status of the photographic and filmic image. *Time* magazine drew particular controversy over this when it was revealed that a cover shot of O. J. Simpson had been digitally altered and Simpson's face visually darkened. The representational authenticity of the image was thrown into question with dubious racial implications. On the issue of digital technology in film see Stephen Prince (1996).

3   In 1988, a French trial court permanently banned the television broadcast of a colourized version of John Huston's *The Asphalt Jungle* on the basis that it would cause 'unmendable and intolerable damage' to the integrity of the work and would therefore compromise Huston's moral rights.

4   The contestation of historical memory in curatorial display can be witnessed in the controversies surrounding the 'West as America' and the Enola Gay exhibitions at the Smithsonian in 1991 and 1995, respectively. Both were charged with 'political correctness' for their accommodation of perspectives that fall outside of consensual frontier and atomic narratives. For an account of recent curatorial controversies, see Mike Wallace (1996).

5   The cover of the January 1989 edition of *American Film* shows Turner dressed as Indiana Jones, wearing a stetson and sporting a rifle, with the caption, 'Raider of the Last Archives'.

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