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Illustrating and Fictionalizing Byzantium – The Role of Visual Elements in Greek Primary School Textbooks

Within the battle for attention in the highly visual, technologically enriched modern pandemonium, classrooms were not spared. While verbal narratives traditionally dominate the discourse as primary manufacturers of meaning, the accompanying visual elements – illustrations, images, or overall design solutions – must not be written off as ephemeral page-fillers or simple amplifiers of textually provided substance. Focusing on the affective processes that accompany cognitive ones (Eilam & Peretz 2012) this paper reconsiders the multilayered subject of “relevance” in the case of the medieval Roman (Byzantine) empire portrayed in modern Greek textbooks, recognizing that a key pedagogical issue revolves around “how something matters” for a learner in their environment (Atkinson 2016). The study considers elementary school materials exclusively (i.e. the 5th grade history book), since this should be the pupils’ first encounter with the medieval era in the nationally-sanctioned curriculum, and younger learners are deemed to be more susceptible to visual representations. By analyzing the „visual grammar“ (Kress & Leeuwen 2006) we are able to map out the hierarchy of knowledge this textbook conveys. Colors, perspective and types of images, therefore, all offer valuable meanings. On a semiotic level, the creative solutions (illustrations) open up a myriad of queries. They are esthetically uniformed, thus functioning as a continuous thread that provides a blurred naivety similar to an archaized children’s fairytale book, lacking in detail and precision. The illustrated faces’ eyes, for example, are very difficult to discern. These creative solutions are especially interesting when compared to the adjacent ancient history textbook (4th grade), where VRs are designed to speak to the reader directly. Before reaching the medieval era, not only do learners have relatable characters dressed in modern clothes that guide them through the visual aids and the textual material, but the humanized faces of illustrated ancient Greeks offer a specter of positive emotions (laughter, joy, satisfaction, etc.), providing a greater level of intimacy (Kress & Leeuwen 2006, 116-125). Interpreting the graphic choices used in the medieval history textbook in Greece, I would argue, reveals a way for constructing affective distance, and shows subtle ways in which long-lasting stereotypes like the discourse of the “dark” Middle Ages (regardless of the color schemes), or the “impersonal peasantry” (Bardsley 2019) permeate the general narrative.

Jovana Andelkovic, a PhD candidate at Simon Fraser University (Canada), is working on a doctoral dissertation concerned with questions of dissidence and genre in the post-iconoclastic Medieval Roman (Byzantine) period. She is trained as a historian (having obtained an MA from the University of Belgrade, Serbia) with a particular focus on epistolography, but her career and studies have continuously nurtured an interest in education, knowledge transmission, and contemporary reception of the past. As a research assistant, Jovana has worked on a project by the ISTLD, designed to evaluate and improve history course materials, and she has organized, taught at, and directed the multidisciplinary programs for advanced students at Petnica Science Centre, and she developed visual and interactive educational materials for young learners at SNF center for Hellenic Studies. After the conclusion of her studies, and her ongoing informal filmmaking training, she is eager to explore the distant voices of history by offering them a different audio-visual shape.