Filmic and Other Forms of Historical Representation in the History Classroom: Ancient Sparta

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Introduction

Teaching the history of classical times in Greek schools has mainly a nation-building dimension, but also moral focus and intentions[1]. The deeds of ancient Greek generals in the Persian and Peloponnesian wars, the military genius of Alexander the Great, the charm of the ancient Greek politicians and philosophers, all allow for history to function as an example to imitate, especially in primary education, while at the same time idealizing life in ancient Greece. The fact that the first time that students are taught history in primary schools (third grade, 8–9 years old) they are being taught Greek mythology during the first half of the year and ancient Greek pre-history during the second (Cycladic, Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations), is indicative of the way ancient history is treated by the Greek educational system. As a consequence of this curriculum design, at least until middle school many students cannot be sure whether Hercules and Alexander the Great are mythical figures or historical persons, and cannot distinguish historical facts from myths. Outside Greece, ancient history and classics are taught mainly in tertiary education, with different agendas and intentions each time, starting from a greater emphasis on the ethical aspects of life in ancient Greece as an example for contemporary democratic and liberal Western political life[2] on the one hand, to the capitalization on classical literature and history for the development of modern skills that meet the needs of contemporary society, such as intercultural communication, advocacy for human rights and developing critical thinking[3], on the other.

The aims of teaching classical antiquity are often connected to the exposure of students to ecumenical values as they were formed in the world of Greek and Roman antiquity, while it is common to emphasize historical personalities that represent ideals such as patriotism, courage, comradeship etc. in order to inspire such attitudes in students and introduce them to the essence of these ideals. However, this approach may end up ahistorical, as it idealizes entire historical periods and distorts historical reality, turning incidents of ancient history into examples to imitate, without teaching valuable historical skills such as analysis of primary and secondary sources, detailed examination of available information in order to interpret particular political decisions through a research process, or connection of cause and consequence. At the same time, emphasis on the actions of historical personalities such as Pericles and Alexander the Great annihilates the social factor in historical developments, as well as the role of the specific historical contexts. After all, the Greek history teacher's book, which is distributed to Greek history teachers through the Ministry of Education in order to educate them on issues of teaching ancient history, warns its readers of this specific danger:

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[1] Efi Avdela, "Chronos, Istoria, Ethniki Taytotita" ["Time, History, National Identity"], in *Ti Ein' I Patrida Mas? Ethnokentrismos stin Ekpaideusi* (in Greek) [*What is our Country? Ethnocentrism in Education*], eds. Anna Fragoudaki and Thaleia Dragona, (Athens: Alexandreia, 1997); Giorgos Kokkinos, *Apo tin Istoria stis Istories* (in Greek) [*From History to Histories*] (Athens: Ellinika Grammata, 1998); Maria Repoussi, "Politics Questions History Education. Debates on Greek History Textbooks," *Annales de la Société Internationale pour la Didactique de l'Histoire Yearbook 2006/2007* (2007): 99-110.

[2] Victor Davis Hanson and John Heath, *Who Killed Homer: The Demise of Classical Education and the Recovery of Greek Wisdom* (New York: Free Press, 1998).

[3] Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Harvard University Press, 1997): https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjghth8.

It is impossible to limit the history lesson in this sanctimonious role. Humans are not characterized only by virtues. If the history lesson aims at offering its students, as much as possible, accurate knowledge of the past and helping them understand it, then it has to underline not only the bright sides of others' behavior, but also the dark ones. The dangers for the history lesson, which are inherent in the one-sided and dogmatic development of the sanctimonious style are obvious. History schoolbooks, following the national curricula, in order to edify national heroes, do not hesitate to glorify their behavior and generally their actions to the point of exaggeration, to stride to the realm of the irrational, to add to their narrations imaginary events and generally disdain the truth. [4]

The battle of Thermopylae in particular is considered the epitome of democracy's victory against theocracy, of a Western worldview against Eastern, of the ascendance of what later became European ideals against the alleged barbarianism the Persians represented in the collective imagination. This is the reason why the great battles of the Persian wars (Marathon, Thermopylae, Salamis) have become paradigms of the war against and the victory over Eastern tyranny[5]. Their representations in contemporary culture suggest the superiority of Western civilization, as it is represented retrospectively in the faces of the Spartan warriors, strengthening thus xenophobic attitudes towards anything of Eastern origin during the greatest part of the 20th century and up until the 2010s[6]. The preference for representing the battle of Thermopylae in popular culture, in particular, is not accidental: the sacrifice of Leonidas and his soldiers is presented as a prototype for the fight of modern democracies against totalitarianism of any kind, at any cost.

The pedagogical intervention described here aims at a more manifold presentation of this part of ancient Greek history, with a special interest in life in ancient Sparta and the battle of Thermopylae and its importance for world history, but also the moral example it sets as an act of patriotism, courage and self-sacrifice (and, in addition, of military brilliance, if it were not for Ephialtes' betrayal). Moreover, a central interest of the study is for students to examine the different historical representations in popular media and reflect on them, since the battle of Thermopylae and the sacrifice of Leonidas and his 300 Spartans, as well as the Spartan way of life, have become examples and objects of study and admiration over time, through visual and other media. How do a poem, a graphic novel, a film and ancient written sources deal with the same facts? Do students understand the importance, agenda and mechanisms of each of these representations? Which of these do they consider more accurate? All these questions are formed in accordance with the classical reception studies discourse, which aims to understand the perception and reception of classical antiquity in the modern world, in order to initiate a meaningful dialogue with it[7]. For this purpose, we used three kinds of contemporary representations of the above, all of which have proven to be extremely popular depictions of ancient Greek history. In particular, we use a film, a graphic novel and a poem, in addition to three primary sources from antiquity, in order to introduce students to the historical reasoning process.

The Visual Learning of History

While more traditional methods of teaching about periods or historical personalities such as with the use of primary historical sources have formed the canon for decades, especially in the Greek school context, lately ancient history is being taught with the use of visual media such as films and TV series[8], the internet and interactive

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[4] Theodoros Koutsoulakos, Georgia Kokkorou-Alevra and Vasileios Skoulatos, *Archaia Istoria A' Gymnasiou, Vivlio Ekpaideutikou* (in Greek) [*Ancient History, Teacher's Book*] (Athens: Institute of Computer Technology and Publications Diofantos, n.d.), 14.

[5] Stephen Kershaw, *The Harvest of War: Marathon, Thermopylae and Salamis: the Epic Battles that Saved Democracy* (New York, London: Pegasus Books, 2022).

[6] Kelsey Kilby, "Subversions of the Thermopylae Myth in Modern Literature," *The Albatross* 8 (2018): 76-88.

[7] Charles Martindale and Richard F. Thomas, *Classics and the Uses of Reception. Classical Receptions* (Oxford: Blackwell Publications, 2006); Marguerite Johnson, "Classical Reception Studies: some Pedagogical Approaches," *Classicum* 39, no. 2 (2013): 6–14.

[8] Rhiannon Evans and Sarah Midford, "Teaching Historical Literacies to Digital Learners via Popular Culture," *Arts and Humanities in*

educational material[9], and even graphic novels[10] and computer games[11]. Research after research has confirmed that movies have become the main source of historical learning for students and cinema plays a major role in our understanding of the past[12]. Cinema has a special characteristic that allows for audiovisual representation of past times, events and personalities, leaving little to the imagination and often, especially for those of a young age, offering a view of the past that has become commonplace in screen representation[13], even though sometimes it is far away from the actual historical past. These audiovisual representations the big screen offers, however, have not been compared in depth nor contradicted with other representations, especially regarding their pedagogical value. Thus, the current research questions are formed as follows: Do students doubt the cinematic representation of history when it is challenged through analysis? Which type of historical source is perceived as more accurate and which less and why, given that students are introduced to their inconsistencies, limitations and agendas? Can a multimodal presentation of the same facts of ancient history lead to distinguishing the aims of each form of representation? Which kind of historical representation and source is preferable for students in the history classroom and why?

In order to address these questions, I conducted an experiment in which 25 students of the second grade of middle school (13-14 years old) participated. The school where the pedagogical intervention took place is a school in Central Greece, with very high numbers of Roma, as well as migrant students. The current Greek curriculum gives space for the teaching of skills that lead to the development of visual literacy while at the same time attempting to be inclusive. However, students with the abovementioned cultural background have little chance of succeeding in an educational system that cares primarily about the measurable academic development of the students, thus leaving many of them behind. The intervention was designed in order for students to develop skills of visual literacy, engage in the learning process and become active members in it, making the development of skills, such as audiovisual literacy and source criticism, that are loosely related to the current official curriculum, part of this process. Therefore, the goals of the intervention were for students to:

1. Interpret the importance of the battle of Thermopylae in world history and appreciate the sacrifice of Leonidas and the Spartans;
2. Compare, contrast and interpret the various representations of the decision process to proceed to the battle of Thermopylae in various media (ancient sources, contemporary poem, film, graphic novel) based on the peculiarities and agenda of each medium;
3. Compare ways of representation relating to life in ancient Sparta in the antiquity sources and contemporary popular culture and point out differences between the means of representation; relate

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Higher Education 21, no. 3 (2022): 285–301.

[9] Maria Mavrommati. *e- Arxaia Istoria: Protaseis Didaskalias me ti Hrisi Pigon* (in Greek) [e- Ancient History: Lesson Plans with the Use of Sources], (Thessaloniki: Grafima, 2018).

[10] Vasileios Zagkotas, "Are Comic Books Appropriate for Teaching History? Three Suggestions for Greek Primary Education," *Education 3-13* 47, no. 3 (2019): 358-365, https://10.1080/03004279.2018.1452955.

[11] Andrew McMichael, "PC Games and the Teaching of History," *The History Teacher* 40, no. 2 (2007): 203–18.

[12] Scott Alan Metzger, "Maximizing the Educational Power of History Movies in the Classroom," *The Social Studies* 101, no. 3 (2010): 127-136; Richard Paxton and Alan Marcus, "Film Media in History Teaching and Learning," in *The Wiley International Handbook in History Teaching and Learning,* eds. Scott Alan Metzger & Lauren McArthur Harris (Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), 579-601, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119100812.ch22; Jeremy Stoddard, "Film as a 'Thoughtful' Medium for Teaching History," *Learning, Media and Technology* 37, no. 3 (2012): 271-288, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2011.572976; Maria Mavrommati, "Enhancing Historical Film Literacy: a Practical Framework and Findings from an Undergraduate Classroom," *International Journal of Research on History Didactics, History Education, and History Culture. Yearbook of the International Society for History Didactics* (JHEC) 40 (2018): 143-160; Maria Mavrommati and Maria Repoussi, "'Something was Wrong with the Movie:' Formal Analysis of Historical Films and the Development of Historical Literacy," *Infancia y Aprendizaje/Journal for the Study of Education and Development* 43, no. 3 (2020): 574-605.

[13] Robert Rosenstone, *History on Film / Film on History* (Great Britain: Pearson Education, 2006).

these differences to the aims and functions of each of the selected media, asking questions about the realism, aims and agenda of such representations; and

4. Discuss the reasons for the popularity of the battle of Thermopylae and the Spartan way of life in various media in contemporary times and distinguish the presentation of the historical facts from their contemporary uses as moral examples.

The Design of the Pedagogical Intervention

In the Greek history curriculum, ancient Greek history is taught three times, i.e. in primary school, in middle school and in high school, as a spiral curriculum design is followed for history. Each time, the main interest of the pedagogical discourse is centered around ideas like democracy and historical personalities such as Alexander the Great, always with a special focus on introducing and developing a nationalistic perspective[14]. According to this perspective, there is continuity between modern and ancient Greeks, which has not been interrupted either by the 400 years (in northern Greece 500 years) of Ottoman occupancy, nor the myriad population transformations, additions and alterations resulting from modern Greece's (used here in the geographical meaning of the word) participation in four consecutive empires: the Hellenistic empire of the Macedonians, the Roman, the Byzantine and the Ottoman Empire, all of which had strong multicultural characteristics. In addition, the Greek history curriculum is entirely monocultural, avoiding multiperspectivity. Schools in which there are high numbers of Roma and immigrant students, like the one this intervention took place, do not follow a specific differentiated history curriculum which could be of interest to the specific student population. In the Greek history curriculum, there is no interest in offering students a culturally responsive education that would enhance their interest in history and develop their historical thinking skills[15].

Although ancient Greek and Roman history are taught in the first grade of middle school (ages 12–13), in the second grade literature class, students are taught a poem by K.P. Cavafy named "Thermopylae" (written in 1903), which refers to the great battle fought by Leonidas' Spartans and has remained in universal consciousness as the epitome of love for one's country as well as an example of self-sacrifice and courage. This poem served as the starting point for our journey in the multimodal approach to the historical fact of the battle of Thermopylae and the life of the Spartans, as well as the ideal of fighting for a higher cause without considering the consequences at a personal level, which is not at all a given in today's postmodern, cynical society. While teaching the poem, I was surprised by the students' interest in the facts surrounding the battle (which, as they explained, was a consequence of having watched the film "*300*" on Greek TV) and decided to attempt to teach about the life of the Spartans and our current knowledge and beliefs about it using multimodal representations of the facts, as well as modern interpretations of them, thus connecting the history and literature curriculum. In addition, the closure of the school year in that specific year would be marked by an educational visit to Thermopylae, which is very close to the school area, making this intervention a great opportunity for students to appreciate the events surrounding the battle.

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[14] Christina Koulouri, *Istoria kai Geografia sta Ellinika Scholeia (1834-1914): Gnostiko Antikeimeno kai Ideologikes Proektaseis* (in Greek) [*History and Geography in Greek School Textbooks 1834–1914: Learning Subjects and Ideological Implications*] (Athens: Istoriko Arxeio Ellinikis Neolaias, 1988); Kostas Kasvikis and Georgia Kouseri, "Antiquity Revisited: Challenges and Opportunities in the Creation of the new Greek History Curriculum," *History Education Research Journal* 16, no. 2 (2019): 182–94, https://doi.org/10.18546/HERJ.16.2.03

[15] Richard Harris and Rosemary Reynolds, "The History Curriculum and its Personal Connection to Students from Minority Ethnic Backgrounds," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 46, no. 4 (2014): 464-486, https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2014.881925.

The Educational Material

The Poem Thermopylae

Cavafy's "Thermopylae" is taught continuously in Greek schools with the purpose of instilling the values of patriotism and self-sacrifice into the students, as it is one of the best-known poems by the poet and is appropriate for a first approach to his work at a young age. C. P. Cavafy was a Greek diaspora poet who lived in the 19th and 20th centuries and had great appeal in the Greek literary world due to his poetry's cosmopolitan character and the use of historical elements in his work, but also due to the deep philosophical and existential content of his work. The poem in question is one of his historical poems, which make up a large part of his work, since many of them refer to the historical reality, and specifically that of Greek- Roman antiquity, with obvious references to his contemporary times. These poems use antiquity as a starting point in order to reflect on philosophical issues. The poem "Thermopylae" consists of 14 verses, in which the poet expresses his deep admiration for the altruistic and patriotic act of Leonidas and the Spartan warriors in Thermopylae, while on a second level it talks about faith and persistence in ideals, even if this persistence seems pointless, if not foolish. After all, in Greece today the expression "guarding Thermopylae", which is a verse from the above poem, means the unconditional fight for the defense of ideals, an expression that may sometimes be said in a sarcastic tone. During the intervention's first stage we analyzed the poem, emphasizing the reasons why Cavafy was inspired by an event that happened 2500 years before his time. After the analysis, our discussion revolved around possible reasons for this: because Leonidas and his comrades proved their unconditional love for their country, and because it is important to fight for one's ideals, even if this seems pointless. Kindness, patriotism, collectivity and sacrifice for the common good and higher purposes make up a system of beliefs that Cavafy glorifies in his poem and which also constitute consistent attributes of moral behavior today, and this is the reason why this poem is so popular in Greece and worldwide and is taught continuously in Greek schools.

The Film "300"

The second piece of educational material that was used was the film *300*, released in 2007 and directed by Zack Snyder. This film is an adaptation of a graphic novel of the same name, already very popular at the time the film was released, created by Frank Miller. Its aesthetic choices are a reproduction of those of the graphic novel, in terms of cinematography, mise-en-scène and also script, with some frames being a direct transfer from the graphic novel to the filmic medium[16]. After all, the director of the film never denied that his work was a faithful adaptation of the graphic novel and not a historical treatise, and that the genre of the film was more an opera than a documentary[17]. The film has been criticized by cinema critics, academic historians, and even the Iranian government since it came out, for its cartoonist aesthetics, which underline its unreal style, its many historical inaccuracies, its ideological implications, the extreme use of violence, the objectification of women," and the problematic presentation of women's role in the narrated facts in general.[18] It is also criticized for its

[16] Murray, G. N., "Zack Snyder, Frank Miller and Herodotus: Three Takes on the 300 Spartans," *Akroterion* 52 (2007): 11-35, https://doi.org/10.7445/52-0-50.

[17] Josh Horowitz, "*'300' Trivia: Albino Giants, Sequel Chances — And* Sienna Miller", last modified March 13, 2007, http://www.mtv.com/movies/news/articles/1554534/20070313/story.jhtml

[18] George A. Kovacs, "Truth, Justice, and the Spartan Way: Freedom and Democracy in Frank Miller's *300,*" in *Classics in the Modern World: A Democratic Turn?, eds.* Lorna Hardwick and Stephen Harrison (Oxford: Classical Presences, 2013), 380-392, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199673926.003.0026; Ephraim Lytle, "Sparta? No. This is madness", last modified March 11, 2007, https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/2007/03/11/sparta_no_this_is_madness.html; Stacey Scriver, "Subjectivity, Identity and 300 Spartans," *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 14 (2009): 183–199 http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/pcs.2008.35; Robert Ebert, "Spartan Special at CGI Friday's", last modified August 4, 2008, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/300-2006; Adam W. Tyma, "This is Sparta! Mediated Mythology as Pedagogy in 300," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 39, no. 1 (2014): 5–20, https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859914539506; Tyma, *This is Sparta* Thorsten Beigel, "With Your Shield or On It: The Gender of Heroism in Zack Snyder's 300 and Rudolph Mate's the 300 Spartans," in *Ancient Worlds in Film and Television, Gender and Politics,* eds. Almut-Barbara Renger and Jon Solomon (Leiden:

emphasis on supernatural masculinity, which is initially apparent in the depiction of bodily characteristics on the big screen, making Roger Ebert, a renowned film critic, wonder whether they have been "buying steroids wholesale for *300*"[19]. Academic analysis of this film underlines the reproduction of a series of racist, homophobic and antifeminist clichés[20]. It was also criticized by the Iranian government as xenophobic, because of its racist representation of Persians who are depicted as uncivilized, feminine, detestable and boorish[21].

It was exactly because of the above problematic issues raised through the close examination of the film and not despite them that this specific film was chosen as teaching material, along with its status as a popular film inspired by historical facts. After all, historical consciousness is shaped basically though Hollywood films[22], detailed analysis of which rarely fails to reveal problematic points. I considered this film to be an excellent opportunity to discuss with my students the mechanisms through which the film industry may use historical facts to talk about current affairs and modern ideologies more than about the actual facts. It was therefore my goal to deconstruct the common conception, especially among students of this age, that they can "learn history" though films, meaning they can learn the truth about the historical facts represented. Of course, the scenes used in the classroom were selected carefully and were placed in a carefully structured course design with specific aims and additional supportive material. The specific film, then, precisely because of its inaccuracies and the discussions it raised can be used not as a simple visual representation of the past, but as a starting point for a discussion about the ways the past is perceived today, the reasons we still engage with this past, and its agendas in relation to contemporary life; in other words it is used in order to create the conditions for a discussion about the role of the historical past and the reasons why we need to engage with history in a critical manner.

The Graphic Novel

The graphic novel "*300*", released in 1998, belongs to a series of graphic novels with a superhero as its central figure, in the tradition of the comic books that started to flourish in 1930s USA. In this case however, the superhero is a historical personality of ancient times. The qualities of the superhero are all accumulated in the figure of Leonidas, whose name has become synonymous with bravery, war ethos, courage, mental strength and self-sacrifice. In addition, the renowned Spartan *agogi*, Sparta's educational system which emphasized military training from a young age, in which Leonidas and his 300 comrades were raised, creates a very appealing environment for the average reader of this category of comic books. Miller's noir influences are clear, as is his invocation of the "hypermasculine teenage ethos"[23]. In addition, the references to Spartan education that enhance the image of the superhuman power and discipline of Leonidas and the Spartan warriors, reminiscent of the qualities of superheroes, are common in Miller's work. The same goes with the contestation of the role of the ephors, who appear corrupt at the very least; this is commonplace in Miller's work, who stands against organized power structures such as the Church in other works as well (e.g. *Sin City*).

Brill, 2013), 65-78, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004241923_005; Vincent Tomasso, "Gorgo at the Limits of Liberation in Zack Snyder's 300 (2007)," in *Screening Love and Sex in the Ancient World,* ed. Monica S. Cyrino (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 113-126, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137299604_9.

[19] Ebert, *Spartan Special.*

[20] Murray, "Zack Snyder"; David C. Oh and Doreen V. Kutufam, "The Orientalized "Other" and Corrosive Femininity: Threats to White Masculinity in 300," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 38, no. 2 (2014): 149–165, https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859914523983.

[21] "Iran Condemns Hollywood War Epic", BBC, last modified March 13, 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6446183.stm

[22] Rosenstone, *History on Film.*

[23] Kovacs, *Truth, Justice,* 382.

The Sources from Antiquity

The ancient sources used were from Diodorus' *Historical library,* book 11, 11.4[24] which was used as a source from antiquity, in order to get information about the decision of the battle of Thermopylae, although the source is dated 400 years after the events, thus its value could be contested. A second source from antiquity was Xenophon's *The Polity of the Lacedaemonians*, 2.1–2.5[25]. The specific text analyses the peculiarities of the Spartan *agogi*, on which parts of the film are based. Xenophon's *The Polity of the Lacedaemonians* 8.1–8.5[26], where the Spartan political system and the role of the ephors are described, was also used.

Lesson Design and Implementation

The educational intervention took place in two groups of second-grade students in middle school and lasted for five teaching hours for each group. The total number of students participating was 25, and data was collected from both groups of students. Starting from the literature class and the lively discussions following the reading and examination of Cavafy's poem (first teaching hour), we focused on the representation of the specific battle in cinema. We specifically discussed and compared a) the Spartan *agogi*, as the basis and reason for patriotism and absolute self-sacrifice, since the Spartans were extremely brave warriors as a consequence of this specific educational system, b) the decision process to go to the battle of Thermopylae, and c) the role of the ephors in ancient Sparta.

The whole presentation of Leonidas on the one hand and the Spartan idea of debt to one's country on the other, is explained, in historiography as well as in fiction, through the lens of the special education which Spartans received. More particularly, the city was responsible for the military education of every healthy male child from the age of seven, providing them with military training and protection until the age of 20, when they would become proper Spartan warriors and complete their military service until the age of 30. According to Xenophon (*The Polity of the Lacedaemonians*, 2.1–2.5), the Spartan *agogi* included punishment of the boys using methods such as whipping to enforce discipline, deprivation of food in order to make the body get used to less food, walking and climbing barefoot, so that feet did not need the protection of shoes. The film causally connects the effects of Spartan *agogi* to the bravery and patriotism of Leonidas and the Spartans, starting with a scene that re-enacts the training of Leonidas. As a consequence of this hard training, the ruling class of the city welcomed him as a king, acknowledging his bravery and military excellence, thus explaining the courage and unselfishness of the king of Sparta. This causal relationship is a direct lift from the graphic novel, in which the proclamation of Leonidas as king causally follows his successful training, as part of *agogi*. In particular, what evidenced his extraordinary bravery was his confrontation and killing of a wolf when he was left alone to survive in the frozen wilderness. Leonidas outsmarts the wolf by luring it into a narrow rocky pass, forecasting visually the battle in the narrow pass of Thermopylae. This specific narration is not based on any confirmed historical account, but is used dramaturgically in order to support Leonidas' image as a mythical king, which is underlined even more by the fact that the story of the child who came back as king is a story that warriors share when sitting around the fire, so that they are inspired by the glory and honor that surrounded their king, even while he was still alive. The specific sequence of scenes and frames of the comic was accompanied by Xenophon's historical source, the details of which were compared to the representations of the two visual sources, the film and the graphic novel. After a dialogue relating to tracing differences and similarities between these representations, students were asked to give written answers to a questionnaire handout that was distributed in print form (second hour of the intervention).

During the third hour of the intervention, students watched the dialogue scene between Leonidas and the

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[24] Diodorus, *Historical Library*, book 11, 11.4, available at http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Diod.+11.4

[25] Xenofon, *The Polity of Laecedemonians*, 2.1–2, available at http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0210%3Atext%3DConst.+Lac.%3Achapter%3D2

[26] Xenophon, *The Polity of the Lacedaemonians,* 8.1–8.5, available at http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0210%3Atext%3DConst.+Lac.%3Achapter%3D8

ephors regarding the battle of Thermopylae. During this scene, the ephors are represented almost as lepers, extraordinary creatures with corruption, cruelty and ghastly appearance as their main characteristics[27]. During his meeting with them, Leonidas asks them to approve his proposal to fight the Persians in Thermopylae, after he satisfies their thirst for gold. This scene is depicted in an almost identical manner in the graphic novel. However, the antiquity sources with which the content of the scene was compared, those by Diodorus and Xenophon, give a completely different picture. According to Xenophon, the ephors were higher lords of the city of Sparta, to whom the king was completely devoted. Their role was to secure the Spartan polity. In the relevant source by Diodorus, we learn that Leonidas suggested taking a small army with him to fight in Thermopylae, and there is no reference to paying the ephors off, or of them denying his proposal. In particular, we learn that the ephors discuss Leonidas' choice to conduct a battle with such a small number of soldiers, because of the doubtful outcome of the plan. Diodorus, four centuries after the battle, explains that the ephors remarked to Leonidas that he would use too few soldiers to fight such a great number of Persians, to which comment Leonidas answered ambiguously that, for the deed he wants them, they are a good number. After we examined these two sources, the students were asked to give written answers to questions relating to the similarities and differences between the four accounts (two antiquity sources, the film and the comic book) (third hour).

During the fourth hour of the intervention, starting from the same film scene and series of comic frames, we discussed the representation of the ephors in these two visual sources and compared them to the account of their role as recorded by Xenophon. Again, at the end of this session, students were asked to compare the different sources and discuss the reasons for the divergence, and then write their answers to relevant answers in their questions log (fourth hour).

During the last hour of the intervention, we discussed the modern perception of the battle of Thermopylae and its re-enactment in the film in question. How is the representation of the Persians related to the contemporary (at the time of the screening of the film) perception of their descendants, the Iranians, in the Western world? How does this representation fit with the Western world's rivalry with the Muslim world? At the end of the final hour of the intervention, students were asked to answer questions relating to their perception of the film, the graphic novel, the poem and the antiquity sources and the ways all these re-enact the past (fifth hour).

Data Analysis and Discussion

Four major themes, which correspond to the initial research questions, emerged from the data analysis process. The data collected was all students' answers to open-ended questions, which the students wrote at the end of each 45-minute class. The number of students attending the classes was 25, which is a fair number for qualitative research. Not all students answered all the questions, however, and some answers were incomprehensible, hence the difference between the total number of the students and the number of answers provided in each question. The questions were open-ended and the answers provided rich data which answered the initial research questions. The students' answers were transcribed and categorized, and then codes were identified and combined into themes, which corresponded to the foci of the research questions. Therefore, the themes were a) challenging current beliefs about the nature of film as history, b) characteristics of sources for history learning, c) distinguishing the different agendas of each form of historical representation and d) student preferences for history learning material. The major findings of the data analysis were the following, responding to the respective questions:

1. Do students doubt the cinematic representation of history when it is challenged through analysis?

Each film clip used was correlated to the respective graphic novel frames it was inspired by and the antiquity sources referring to the relevant facts. Students were expected to question the validity of the filmic representation after they were exposed to detailed analysis and discussion of the inconsistencies, mistakes and exaggerations of the filmic medium, especially since its representations emerge from the graphic novel.

The shift in the evaluation of the film as valid source of information by the students is insignificant. In total, 9

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[27] Murray, Zack Snyder.

students in total considered the film as a more trustworthy source after the intervention, when the initial number of students considering films as a credible source was 11. In addition, at the beginning of the intervention, 11 students considered the antiquity sources as more accurate sources of knowledge about the past, while after the classes this number was reduced to 10. It is interesting that despite the lively conversations about the inaccuracies of the filmic representation and the comparative analysis of the other sources, almost half the students in total were still convinced, by the end of the intervention, that the film was a more trustworthy source, validating existing research with similar findings, namely that films are credible sources of information about the past[28]. Possible reasons for this were found in the analysis of the questions regarding the characteristics of each form and their relationship to objectivity and truth, as described in the answer to the research question 2, below.

2. Which form of historical source is perceived as more accurate and which less and why, given that students are introduced to their inconsistencies, limitations and agendas?

Although during the lessons the connection between the graphic novel and the film was made evident, as the film was an adaptation of the graphic novel, students believe that the film is more realistic and closer to the historical truth than the graphic novel. The graphic novel is not considered realistic nor reliable, even though a frame-by-frame analysis of the comic in juxtaposition with the cinematic frames it inspired was employed. For students in this group, realism in historical representation stems from the details depicted in the cinematic medium and the narrative depiction of facts, which are both a result of the audiovisual character of the film, echoing Harris et al.'s findings on students' preference to secondary sources as more trustworthy[29]. Although many of them commented on the inaccuracies of the filmic representation, as those were made evident from the analysis against the written antiquity sources, the film is still considered more accurate. The interesting point about the students' perception is that they believe that the visual nature of the film renders some accuracy, even though they do not consider it wholly truthful. Interestingly, it is evident that for students who are used to realistic digital representations, visual realism equals accuracy and validity in presenting facts. It seems that students used the term "accuracy" instead of "authenticity", two terms often used interchangeably, as explained by Saxton who contends that "authenticity refers to the experience of consuming an historical text and the audience's impression of whether it captures the past, even if this is at odds with available evidence" while accuracy refers to the amount of historical details found in a historical fiction production that can be verified by relevant historical research[30]. For example, a student commented that "the film is more truthful because it shows scenes and is more realistic, while the source from antiquity is less truthful because it does not analyze so much". In other words, more visual details amount to a more accurate historical representation, according to the students in this study.

3. Can a multimodal presentation of the same facts of ancient history lead to distinguishing the aims of each form of representation?

Students considered the film and the written sources from antiquity of equal value to the construction of a historical narrative. The difference between the written sources and the film was their nature, as the written sources were considered less analytical and more confusing, although for many students they were closer to the

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[28] Peter Seixas. "Popular Film and Young People's Understanding of the History of Native American-White relations," *The History Teacher* 26, no. 3 (1993): 351–370; Peter Afflerbach and Bruce VanSledright, "Hath! Doth! What? Middle Graders Reading Innovative History Text," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 44, no. 8 (2001): 696–707; Jeremy D. Stoddard, "The Ideological Implications of Using "Educational" Film to Teach Controversial Events," *Curriculum Inquiry* 39, no. 3 (2009): 407–433, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-873X.2009.00450.x.

[29] Lauren McArthur Harris, Anne-Lise Halvorsen, Gerardo J. Aponte-Martínez, "'[My] Family has Gone Through that': How High School Students Determine the Trustworthiness of Historical Documents," *The Journal of Social Studies Research* 40, no. 2 (2015): 109-121, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jssr.2015.06.007.

[30] Laura Saxton, "A True Story: Defining Accuracy and Authenticity in Historical Fiction," *Rethinking History* 24, no. 2 (2020): 127-144, https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2020.1727189.

historical truth because they were produced closer to the events, in chronological terms. Those students that considered the ancient written sources to be more accurate also commented that the film has different aims, i.e. to be more realistic and easy to understand. For example, a student commented that "a historical source would tell the truth about the battle of Thermopylae because someone saw it and wrote it, while in the film and in the comic they would put some lies in". At the same time, the poem's moral focus was identified and very few students considered it a proper source for historical learning. A student wrote "the poet, depending on the sources, writes a poem with evidence he takes from the primary sources, but with a deeper meaning", while for another student "the aim of the poem is to honor the 300, but the comic book and the film present us with the facts". Students seem to distinguish between mere presentation of facts by the sources from antiquity and the film, and the moral and sentimental focus of the poem, hence trusting the latter less as source of information about historical facts, similarly to Harris et al.'s findings on students' skepticism about the use of songs as valid sources of information about the past[31]. The graphic novel, even though identified at the very start of the intervention as the inspiration for the movie, was not considered as faithful to the historical events as the movie. According to a student "basically, the comic is far from the truth because it has a funny style, while all the others [film, antiquity sources and poem] are as close as possible to reality". The students considered the film as an appropriate tool for learning, even though they identified its ideological implications and the inaccuracies, because of its visual nature ("in the film everything becomes more dramatic, and in the ancient source there has to be truth"). This visual nature equals details and details equal historical truth, according to the students, confirming Saxton when she explains that "the cumulative effect of seemingly accurate details is thus a sense of realism and, in turn, believability"[32]. Therefore, it seems that students did realize the different foci and aims of each source, and how this is reflected in the ways facts are represented in each medium, however they showed a strong preference to film as a source of information about the past.

4. What kind of historical representation and source is preferable for students in the history classroom and why?

Both the written sources from antiquity and the poem are considered inappropriate for teaching history by most of the students, because of the textual form and the difficulties relating to the written text. In both, the density of the written form is a constraining factor for historical learning and usage in the history classroom, although many students commented on the value of the historical source as a first source for information and of the poem as a symbolic representation of the battle of Thermopylae. In addition, students considered all the written historical sources from antiquity used in the intervention of equal trustworthiness, even though the problematic nature of Diodorous' source, which is dated many centuries after the actual battle of Thermopylae, was thoroughly discussed. In addition, for some students the poem was also considered a primary written source, and for those students it was considered inappropriate for learning history due to its textual form. The ancient Greek text, although translated into modern Greek, is difficult for students to understand, since the language is difficult and the text is not written in order to give direct answers to questions we raise today in the history classroom. The four dimensions of time, space, culture and language are the reasons for this distance of the students from the primary sources[33], especially the ancient ones. Therefore, for most students, the visual contemporary sources, and mostly the film, are considered more appropriate for learning history, even though their weaknesses were discussed in detail.

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[31] Harris et al., *[My] Family*.

[32] Saxton, *A True Story*, 133.

[33] Lamiaa Youssef, "A Matter of Relevance: Teaching Classics in the 21st Century," *College Teaching* 58, no. 1 (2009): 28-31, https://doi.org/10.1080/87567550903252819.

Conclusions

Ancient history can be taught in very constructive and meaningful ways, if popular media are used along with primary sources from antiquity, but also when the teaching drifts away from the ethical approach usually followed. After all, ancient history is history too, and its teaching aims should not be different from those of other historical periods. Teachers could be inspired by the current discourse on the reception of these times and its implications in forming our dialogue with the past. Regarding the material used for a more holistic and multimodal approach to teaching ancient history, it should be kept in mind that the spectator is often an unconscious learner, through a process of consuming popular culture[34]. School should not fear popular representations of the past, but work towards deconstructing understandings of the past formed by these representations, especially since students show a strong preference to visual sources of information, such as films. It is evident from the findings of the present research that students still struggle to question the validity of visual representations of the past, even when these are confronted thoroughly in the classroom and students are taught how to question them in a step-by-step approach, a finding in line with similar findings of research that used multimodal, both primary and secondary, sources[35]. However, even when these weaknesses of cinema are addressed, it is still preferable by students, making it even more imperative to include such sources in the history classroom. A multimodal approach to history education including film along with other textual and visual sources presupposes learned guidance by the history teachers[36], as well as a constructivist pedagogy based on dialogue[37]. Even when this is the case though, as with the current intervention, it seems that the power of the visual representation can undermine even a detailed process of source questioning in the classroom, since visual detail is considered enough for a cinematic work to be considered historically accurate. This means that history education should include the contemporary visual representations of the past and challenge them, but also include an understanding of the process of source criticism and visual analysis in order to challenge students' ideas about the accuracy of the cinematic representation[38]. On the other hand, the written material is not a favorite of the students, who seem unable to comprehend it without clear directions and a step-by-step approach. The visual means of representation seem more powerful than the written word, even if the former are proven to be inaccurate. A dialogue between the popular depiction of the past and the historical sources is necessary in order for students to become critical spectators of the past on the screen.

The aim of the present research was to identify the level of students' acceptance of the filmic representations of history as accurate, when these representations are challenged through a carefully designed lesson which with the purpose to deconstruct them. The power of the visual medium, with its enormous narrative abilities, proved much greater than a targeted lesson design and evidence that featured the limitations of the filmic text as a source for history learning. Students still prefer it, although they acknowledge its limitations. Banning the film as one of students' favorite leisure activities is of course neither desirable nor feasible; nor can we expect students to analyze the contents of historical representations of films without arming them with methods to support an analytical evaluation of history on screen. On the contrary, it is exactly the power of this medium that makes it imperative for film to be included more formally as a source in the history classroom. Then, the question "does the film depict historical truth?" is replaced by questions such as "what does the presentation of the historical event in the

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[34] Jerome De Groot, *Consuming History, Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

[35] Harris et al., *My Family*; Jeffery D. Nokes, "Exploring Patterns of Historical Thinking Through Eighth-grade Students' Argumentative Writing," *Journal of Writing Research* 8, no. 3, (2017): 437–467, https://doi.org/10.17239/jowr-2017.08.03.02.

[36] Alan S. Marcus, Richard J. Paxton, and Peter Meyerson, "'The Reality of it All: History Students Read the Movies," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 34, no. 3 (2012): 516–552, https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2006.10473320; Debra Donelly, "Contemporary Multi-modal Historical Representations and the Teaching of Disciplinary Understandings in History," *Journal of International Social Studies* 8, no. 1 (2018): 113-132.

[37] Alexander Cutajar, "What Aspects of Historical Understanding Feature in the Analysis of Moving-Image Sources in the History Classroom?" *History Education Research Journal* 17, no. 2 (2022): 195–213, https://doi.org/10.14324/HERJ.17.2.05.

[38] Mavrommati and Repoussi, *Something Was Wrong*.

film tell us about the culture and society of its time of production and/or its time of analysis?". This can add to the history lesson at school a dimension of inquiry on historical memory and public history, as part of developing a wider form of historical literacy[39]. In such an approach, the main aim of teaching is not to detect inaccuracies and misinformation in the film, but to use those creatively in order to teach students to analyze popular sources of historical representations and view films like any other source of information, about the films' first temporality (historical time depicted) as well as the second (historical time produced) and the third (historical time viewed and/or analyzed in the classroom)[40]. An approach that combines an inquiry on the films' narrative tools such as editing and cinematography (visual literacy), the historical context of its time of production (reception), and research about the contents of the film in combination with contemporary, to the represented time as well as the time of reception, primary sources[41].

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[39] Wolf Kansteiner, "Film, the Past, and a Didactic Dead End: From Teaching History to Teaching Memory," in *Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education*, eds. Mario Cerretero, Stefan Berger and Maria Grever (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 169-190, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-52908-4_9; Metzger, *Maximizing*.

[40] Maria Repoussi and Maria Mavrommati, "Historical Films in History Classrooms: Documentaries or Fiction Films? Teachers' Views and Practices", in *History Education in the Digital Age*, eds. Mario Carretero, Maria Cantabrana and Christian Parellada. (Springer Cham, 2022), 197-216, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10743-6_11.

[41] Debra Donelly, "Using Feature Film in the Teaching of History: The Practitioner Decision-making Dynamic," *Journal of International Social Studies* 4, no. 1 (2014): 17–27; Debra Donelly, "Filmic Pedagogies in the Teaching of History: Research on and Recommendations for Using Video in the Classroom," *International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research* 14, no. 1 (2016): 113–123; Mavrommati and Repoussi, *Something Was Wrong*; Karel Van Nieuwenhuyse, "Is Seeing Believing? On the Educational Use of Mainstream Historical Films in the History Classroom," *International Journal of Research on History Didactics, History Education and Historical Culture* 37 (2016): 191–212.