

FOUCAULDIAN DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND HISTORICAL-CRITICAL PEDAGOGY IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: READING THE ARMENIAN SATIRICAL NEWSPAPER *KHATABALA* (1906-1926)

Kristine Baghdasaryan 

Free University of Berlin

Abstract

This article applies Michel Foucault's conceptual vocabulary to three documented caricatures from the Armenian satirical newspaper *Khatabala*, published in Tiflis during 1906-1916 and revived in 1922 and 1925-1926, in order to connect historical interpretation with historical-critical pedagogy in the late imperial South Caucasus. The study is qualitative and corpus-informed. It draws on a structured research dataset containing several hundred caricatures, articles, and editorials from the South Caucasian satirical press and focuses on three *Khatabala* images already documented in the author's dissertation corpus: Death standing on a mountain of skulls in no. 14 (1906), 'The Question of the Mukhrani Bridge in Tiflis' in no. 22 (1906), and 'Internal Pedagogical Reform at the Hovnanyan School' in no. 34 (1907). These examples were selected purposively to represent three recurrent thematic clusters – intercommunal violence, municipal governance, and communal education – and are treated as analytically illustrative rather than statistically representative. Reading satire as a discursive practice, the article examines how allegory, visual equivalence, captioning, irony, and ridicule expose authority while also producing norms and subject positions. The final section proposes, rather than evaluates, a classroom methodology based on the three sourced caricatures.

Keywords: Michel Foucault, *Khatabala*, South Caucasus, satire, discourse, power/knowledge, normalization, historical-critical pedagogy.

Received: 26.02.2026

Revised: 21.06.2026

Accepted: 02.07.2026

© The Author(s) 2024



This work is licensed under a
Creative Commons
Attribution-NonCommercial
4.0 International License

Introduction

The Armenian satirical newspaper *Khatabala*, founded and edited in Tiflis by Astvatsatur Yeritsyan, provides a revealing archive for examining how violence, municipal governance, education, and social ‘normality’ were represented in the late imperial South Caucasus. Its main publication run extended from 1906 to 1916, followed by revivals in 1922 and 1925-1926. The newspaper addressed an Armenian-language readership while commenting on institutions, conflicts, and public figures across the region. It should therefore be approached neither as a transparent record of events nor as the unmediated voice of an entire community, but as an intervention produced by an urban editorial and artistic milieu with its own political, moral, and aesthetic priorities (Panossian, 2006; Suny, 1993a).

Existing scholarship has reconstructed the political and social history of Armenians in the Russian Empire, the development of the late imperial press, and the role of satire and censorship in public life (McReynolds, 1991; Panossian, 2006; Suny, 1993a). More recent work has begun to examine selected *Khatabala* caricatures and the shared satirical culture of the South Caucasus (Afary & Afary, 2022; Coruk, 2025). Nevertheless, *Khatabala* has more often been used as illustrative evidence for particular historical topics than analyzed as a structured corpus of textual and visual practices. Its potential for a Foucauldian analysis of classification, normalization, and subject formation, and for a corresponding model of historical-critical pedagogy, remains comparatively underdeveloped. This article addresses that gap through a deliberately limited case study rather than a comprehensive history of the newspaper.

The article has two aims. First, it examines how three securely identified *Khatabala* caricatures organize meanings around collective violence, civic authority, institutional discipline, and educational patronage. The close readings focus on *Khatabala* no. 14 (1906), in which Death addresses two visually equivalent armed figures before a mountain of skulls; no. 22 (1906), ‘The Question of the Mukhrani Bridge in Tiflis,’ in which three municipal figures reach the conclusion that a bridge is necessary while already drowning in the Kura; and no. 34 (1907), ‘Internal Pedagogical Reform at the Hovnanyan School,’ in which favouritism and expulsion are represented as institutional ‘reform.’ Second, the article translates the analytical questions raised by these images into a proposed classroom methodology. The claim is not that three caricatures represent the newspaper as a whole, but that their contrasting visual strategies make recurring discursive operations visible.

Foucault defines power not as a possession but as “the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (Foucault,

1982, p. 219). Power is distributed through institutions, practices, and norms, including schools, courts, newspapers, and ritual conventions. His formulation of power/knowledge further emphasizes that fields of knowledge are constituted within relations of power rather than discovered from a neutral position (Foucault, 1977, p. 27). Discourse, in this framework, refers not simply to language or opinion but to historically specific rules and practices that determine what can be said, by whom, about which objects, and with what effects (Foucault, 1972). *Khatabala* is especially productive for this approach because its letters, mock telegrams, captions, editorials, and caricatures assign agency, credibility, ridicule, danger, and respectability unevenly among social actors.

The database underlying this article was developed within a broader dissertation project on South Caucasian satirical periodicals. The primary corpus consists of several hundred caricatures, articles, and editorials drawn from *Khatabala* and Molla Nasreddin and assembled through multi-site archival research, digitized collections, and private holdings. The *Khatabala* material was surveyed issue by issue across 1906–1916, with supplementary coverage of the later revivals through 1926. Digitized images were treated as research surrogates and checked against higher-resolution or physical archival copies where available. For each caricature, the structured dataset records the journal, issue, date, original caption and translation, identified figures, thematic register, compositional structure, chromatic features, artist where identifiable, and archival cross-reference.

The article-specific visual subcorpus consists of three focal images: *Khatabala* no. 14 (1906), no. 22 (1906), and no. 34 (1907). Each belongs to a larger sequence in the database. The Death composition belongs to a cluster of images responding to the Armenian-Azerbaijani violence of 1905–1907; the Mukhrani Bridge image belongs to a recurring sequence on Tiflis municipal governance, financing, and political paralysis; and the Hovnanyan School image belongs to a multi-year cluster criticizing inspection committees, trustees, appointments, school funds, and the institutional management of Armenian education. The unit of analysis is the individual caricature together with its caption, issue context, identified subjects, and archival metadata.

The three examples were selected purposively because they employ different visual mechanisms: allegorical personification and formal equivalence; physiognomic identification and group composition; and institutional irony organized through spatial inclusion and expulsion. Their relationship to the larger corpus is therefore thematic and methodological rather than numerical. They illustrate how the same newspaper could frame mass violence, civic incompetence, and educational patronage through distinct but comparable

techniques of classification, ridicule, and subject formation. No frequency-based or statistically representative claim is made.

Terminology is used with similar caution. The violence of 1905-1907 is described here as Armenian-Azerbaijani violence; the historically common designation 'Armenian-Tatar clashes' is retained only when discussing older historiography or contemporary source language. 'Azerbaijani' refers to the Azerbaijani-speaking population of the South Caucasus, while 'Muslim,' 'Tatar,' and 'Turk' are not treated as interchangeable categories. *Khatabala* is described as a Tiflis-based Armenian-language newspaper. Unless otherwise indicated, Armenian captions are translated by the author, and archival locations follow the records in the dissertation corpus.

Why Satire is Useful for Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

Satire is useful for Foucauldian discourse analysis not because it provides a less mediated or more truthful account than official documentation, but because it makes the operations of classification unusually visible. Caricature selects and exaggerates features; captions fix or destabilize interpretation; allegory condenses institutions into recognizable bodies; and ridicule arranges conduct along implicit scales of intelligence, morality, usefulness, civility, and deviance (Gombrich & Kris, 1940; McPhee & Orenstein, 2011). These devices expose how public authority represents itself, but they also show how a newspaper seeks to shape its readers' judgments.

This double function is central to the present argument. *Khatabala* can challenge imperial administration, clerical authority, school trustees, or social convention while simultaneously exercising normative power through shame, praise, ridicule, and exclusion. Under censorship, satire also communicates through indirection, visual substitution, exaggeration, blankness, and apparent absurdity, thereby revealing both the constraints placed on speech and the strategies by which those constraints were negotiated (McReynolds, 1991). Satire is therefore not merely evidence about power; it is itself a practice within power relations. This makes it especially suitable for analysing how subjects are rendered reasonable or ridiculous, governable or dangerous, exemplary or deficient.

Foucauldian Concepts and the *Khatabala* Archive. Genealogy and Subjugated Knowledges

In *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault describes genealogy as a method that reconstructs struggles, discontinuities, and conflicts rather than tracing

institutions back to a pure origin (Foucault, 2003). He also calls attention to ‘subjugated knowledges’: local or disqualified forms of knowledge obscured by authoritative historical syntheses. *Khatabala* can be read genealogically because its caricatures preserve public arguments about violence, municipal failure, and educational governance that do not appear in the language of official decrees. At the same time, the newspaper should not be romanticized as an unqualified voice ‘from below.’ Its editors and artists were urban intellectuals who exercised cultural authority and defined legitimate and illegitimate conduct through visual ridicule. A genealogical reading must therefore examine both the powers the newspaper contests and the normative power it exercises.

Foucault’s concepts are used selectively rather than as a complete explanatory system. Governmentality – understood as the effort to organize and guide conduct – helps interpret *Khatabala*’s treatment of municipal administration and school governance (Foucault, 1991a). Discipline and normalization are relevant where institutions distribute appointments, classify competence, authorize inclusion, or enforce expulsion (Foucault, 1977). Biopolitics provides a cautious vocabulary for representations of collective mortality and the failure to protect life (Foucault, 2003). Across the three close readings, the central questions concern how visual discourse distributes agency, constructs equivalence or difference, and produces civic and institutional subject positions.

Close Readings: Discourse, Power, and Subject Formation.

The Death Caricature: Visual Equivalence, Violence, and Collective Mortality

Khatabala no. 14 (1906) presents a full-page composition in which a hooded skeletal figure of Death, holding a scythe, stands before a mountain of skulls. Two-armed men flank the central figure. Both wear papakha and closely similar regional coats, and neither is supplied with an ethnic label or a distinctive physiognomic marker. The caption gives Death the principal speaking voice: ‘Hey fools, enough – stop slaughtering each other in vain. At least look at me: I have no room left to keep your corpses.’ The archival copy used here is held in the National Archives of Georgia, Tbilisi.

The full caption changes the interpretation substantially. The image does not present the skulls as the victims of only one community, nor does it permit the viewer to identify one-armed figure as Armenian and the other as Azerbaijani. Instead, formal equivalence is the argument: identical dress, comparable weapons, lowered gazes, and the shared address ‘fools’ place both men within the same field of responsibility. From a Foucauldian perspective, the caricature does not merely reflect violence; it establishes the visual and verbal

rules through which violence becomes intelligible. Death is authorized to speak from above the combatants, while the armed men are rendered silent subjects of accusation.

This construction should not be mistaken for an empirical demonstration that responsibility or suffering was symmetrical in every locality. The image documents *Khatabala's* discursive intervention: it refuses ethnic differentiation at the level of costume and physiognomy and converts the accumulation of corpses into an argument against reciprocal slaughter. Biopolitics is useful here only in a limited sense. The mountain of skulls visualizes collective mortality and the failure of political order to protect life, but the caricature alone cannot establish a comprehensive policy of administrative abandonment. Its evidentiary force lies in the way it makes mass death, shared culpability, and the exhaustion of the social body visible.



Figure 1. Death before a mountain of skulls, addressing two visually equivalent armed figures. *Khatabala*, no. 14 (1906). National Archives of Georgia, Tbilisi. Translation of caption by the author.

The Mukhrani Bridge: Municipal Governmentality and Shared Administrative Failure

The Question of the Mukhrani Bridge in Tiflis,' published in *Khatabala* no. 22 (1906), depicts three identified municipal figures – Prince Cherkezov, N. B. A. Argutyan, and Alexander Khatisyan – sinking together in the Kura River. The caption delivers the central joke: 'You know what, gentlemen, now we are coming to the conviction that it is necessary to build a bridge.' Their recognition arrives only after the failure of municipal action has become a physical catastrophe. The annotated identification plate reproduced below compares the caricatured faces with photographic portraits and shows how the image relies on physiognomic and sartorial markers, including Khatisyan's bald head, spectacles, moustache, and spherical silhouette.

The image is particularly useful for analyzing governmentality because it translates an administrative problem, planning, finance, and urban infrastructure, into a scene of bodies whose conduct has failed. The officials are not shown issuing orders from a secure position; they are immersed in the consequences of their own delay. Municipal authority therefore appears not as a unified sovereign power but as a network of actors whose discussions, interests, and failures govern the practical conditions of urban life. The bridge is both an absent structure and a measure of administrative competence.

The multi-communal composition is also significant. A Georgian nobleman and Armenian civic figures drown in the same water and arrive at the same belated conclusion. *Khatabala's* satire distributes responsibility across the municipal elite rather than attributing failure to a single ethnic community. Yet the caricature does not prove that the three men possessed equal institutional power or identical motives. It produces a public image of shared administrative culpability. Through ridicule, the newspaper positions its readers as competent judges of officials who have failed to govern effectively, thereby exercising its own form of civic disciplinary power.



Figure 2. Annotated identification plate for 'The Question of the Mukhrani Bridge in Tiflis.' The caricature shows Argutyan, Prince Cherkezov, and Alexander Khatisyan sinking in the Kura. *Khatabala*, no. 22 (1906). National Library of Armenia, Yerevan; photographic comparisons and annotations by the author.

The Hovnanyan School: Patronage, Discipline, and the Irony of 'Reform'

Khatabala returned repeatedly to the governance of Armenian communal schools. In no. 34 (1907), the caricature 'Internal Pedagogical Reform at the Hovnanyan School' shows the school building, labelled 'ANANOBKSKE' in Russian, as a space of violent institutional selection. A favoured associate is welcomed on the balcony while other figures are pushed or thrown from the windows; below, a woman witnesses expelled staff members falling around her. The image belongs to a broader sequence that includes the brawling inspection committee in no. 16 (1906), the appointment of trustees' associates in no. 19 (1906), and later attacks on protected school funds and multiple salary-taking. The title's use of 'pedagogical reform' is deliberately inverted. What should designate the improvement of teaching is represented as patronage, exclusion, and physical expulsion. The caricature therefore makes visible the institutional conditions under which educational authority is produced. Teachers and administrators do not enter the school solely through demonstrated competence; they are admitted, retained, or removed through relations of favour. In Foucauldian terms, the school appears not merely as a place where students are disciplined, but as an institution whose own personnel are classified and normalized by trustees and administrators. *Khatabala* simultaneously contests and reproduces disciplinary power. It contests the authority of the school's governing class by exposing 'reform' as a euphemism for institutional self-interest. At the same time, the caricature disciplines its audience through ridicule: it establishes the patronage appointee as illegitimate, the expelled figure as a victim of corrupt procedure, and the reader as a spectator capable of recognizing the difference between genuine educational reform and administrative theatre. The image supports a focused claim about the newspaper's critique of institutional governance; it does not by itself establish the quality of all teaching or administration at the Hovnanyan School.



Figure 3. 'Internal Pedagogical Reform at the Hovnanyan School.' Favoured associates are admitted while others are expelled from the building. *Khatabala*, no. 34 (1907). National Archives of Georgia, Tbilisi.

From Archive to Classroom: A Proposed Foucauldian Methodology

The pedagogical component of this article is a proposed teaching model, not an evaluation of exercises already tested with students. Its purpose is to translate the interpretive procedure into a sequence of source-based activities using the three documented caricatures. Conventional history teaching often begins with the question ‘What happened?’ A Foucauldian approach adds a second set of questions: How does an image organize what may be seen and said? Who is authorized to speak? Which bodies are individualized, classified, silenced, included, or expelled? How does ridicule seek to govern the viewer’s judgment?

The Death caricature can introduce the distinction between observation and inference. Students first list only what is formally visible: a skeletal central figure, a mountain of skulls, two-armed men in similar dress, and a caption spoken by Death. They then identify contextual inferences concerning the violence of 1905–1907. The class can compare an interpretation based on ethnic identification with the image’s actual refusal to differentiate the two combatants. This exercise demonstrates that the absence of a visual distinction may itself constitute a political argument.

The Mukhrani Bridge caricature can be used to teach the relationship between visual identification and historical context. Students compare the caricatured physiognomies with the photographic portraits reproduced in the annotated plate, read the translated caption, and ask how identification changes the meaning of the group scene. They can then map the relations among urban infrastructure, municipal finance, public office, and civic judgment. The central question becomes not simply why a bridge was not built, but how satire produces the ‘incompetent official’ as a recognizable subject position.

The Hovnanyan School image allows students to analyse institutions spatially. They can mark who is inside, who is welcomed, who is expelled, who observes, and who controls the threshold. They can then compare the visual action with the ironic title ‘Internal Pedagogical Reform.’ A coding exercise may assign overlapping categories such as education, patronage, discipline, institutional violence, and normalization. Comparing the results makes clear that coding categories are constructed analytical tools rather than neutral properties already contained in the image.

A final comparative exercise asks students to identify how each caricature distributes speech and silence. Death speaks while the combatants remain silent; municipal officials speak only after their failure has become visible; the school’s expelled figures have no captioned voice at all. Students can then consider Khatabala itself as a technology of power: it challenges violence,

incompetence, and patronage, but it also classifies subjects and directs the reader toward particular judgments. Foucault's description of critique as 'the art of not being governed quite so much' offers a useful conclusion, provided that students also ask how critical media govern their own audiences (Foucault, 2007, p. 44).

Conclusion

This article has offered a limited, corpus-informed analysis of three archival caricatures drawn from the author's documented research corpus: the Death composition of 1906, the Mukhrani Bridge scene of 1906, and the Hovnanyan School caricature of 1907. Each source has an identified issue, title or translated caption, visual description, thematic location within the larger database, and archival reference. This grounding allows the theoretical interpretation to remain closely tied to what the images and their captions actually demonstrate.

The analysis supports three cautious conclusions. First, *Khatabala* used formal equivalence to oppose the ethnic differentiation of armed actors in a scene of collective death, without thereby providing an empirical measure of responsibility for the violence. Second, it represented municipal government as a field of distributed and shared failure, making civic officials answerable to the newspaper's judging public. Third, it exposed educational reform as a contested institutional language through which patronage and expulsion could be normalized. In each case, satire criticized authority while exercising normative power of its own.

The contribution is methodological rather than exhaustive. Foucauldian concepts do not supply ready-made explanations for the South Caucasus, and three caricatures cannot establish *Khatabala's* complete political or social significance. They can, however, demonstrate how visual satire constructs subjects, distributes agency, organizes responsibility, and turns institutional conduct into a public object of judgment. Because the examples are now grounded in the dissertation's archival corpus, they also provide a more reliable basis for the proposed classroom methodology: students can work from identifiable sources while learning to distinguish visual observation, historical inference, and theoretical interpretation.

References

Primary Sources

Khatabala (Armenian satirical newspaper). Tiflis. Principal caricatures analysed: no. 14 (1906), full-page Death composition, National Archives of Georgia, Tbilisi; no. 22 (1906), 'The Question of the Mukhrani Bridge in Tiflis,' National Library of Armenia, Yerevan; no. 34 (1907), 'Internal Pedagogical Reform at the Hovnanyan School,' National Archives of Georgia, Tbilisi. Related education and governance items consulted include nos. 16 and 19 (1906), no. 27 (1906), no. 39 (1908), no. 51 (1908), and nos. 22 and 24 (1910).

Secondary Sources

Afary, J., & Afary, K. (2022). *Molla Nasreddin: The making of a modern trickster, 1906–1911*. Edinburgh University Press.

Berberian, H. (2001). *Armenians and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911*. Westview Press.

Burbank, J., & Cooper, F. (2010). *Empires in world history: Power and the politics of difference*. Princeton University Press.

Coruk, F. J. G. (2025). A study on the Ottoman image in the cartoons of *Khatabala* magazine. *Armenian Studies*, 77, 87–127.

Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge* (A. M. Sheridan Smith, Trans.). Pantheon Books.

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Vintage Books.

Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality: Vol. 1. An introduction* (R. Hurley, Trans.). Vintage Books.

Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972–1977* (C. Gordon, Ed.). Pantheon Books.

Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. In H. L. Dreyfus & P. Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics* (pp. 208–226). University of Chicago Press.

Foucault, M. (1991a). Governmentality. In G. Burchell, C. Gordon, & P. Miller (Eds.), *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality* (pp. 87–104). University of Chicago Press.

Foucault, M. (1991b). Governmental rationality: An introduction. In G. Burchell, C. Gordon, & P. Miller (Eds.), *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality* (pp. 1–51). University of Chicago Press.

Foucault, M. (2003). *Society must be defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976* (D. Macey, Trans.). Picador.

Foucault, M. (2007). What is critique? In S. Lotringer (Ed.), *The politics of truth* (pp. 41–82). Semiotext(e).

Gombrich, E. H., & Kris, E. (1940). *Caricature*. Penguin.

Gutting, G. (2005). *Foucault: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.

McPhee, C., & Orenstein, N. (Eds.). (2011). *Infinite jest: Caricature and satire from Leonardo to Levine*. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

McReynolds, L. (1991). *The news under Russia's old regime: The development of a mass-circulation press*. Princeton University Press.

Mills, S. (1997). *Discourse*. Routledge.

Panossian, R. (2006). *The Armenians: From kings and priests to merchants and commissars*. Hurst.

Suny, R. G. (1993a). *Looking toward Ararat: Armenia in modern history*. Indiana University Press.

Suny, R. G. (1993b). *The revenge of the past: Nationalism, revolution, and the collapse of the Soviet Union*. Stanford University Press.

Swietochowski, T. (1995). *Russia and Azerbaijan: A borderland in transition*. Columbia University Press.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

Disclaimer / Publisher's Note

The statements, opinions and data contained in published works are solely those of the individual author and contributor and do not reflect the views of YSU Publishing House and/or the editor(s). YSU Publishing House and/or the editor(s) assume no responsibility for any injury to persons or damage to property resulting from the use of ideas, methods, instructions or products described in the publications.