



# Critical Vision: Word and Image in the Postmodern Age

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**I**n *Picture Theory*, W. J. T. Mitchell contends that though ours is an age of “all-pervasive image-making, we still do not know exactly what pictures are, what their relation to language is, how they operate on observers and on the world, how their history is to be understood, and what is to be done with or about them.”<sup>1</sup>

What Mitchell calls the “pictorial turn” has its origins in the nineteenth century when mass-produced images dramatically altered what texts looked like and how readers read. In the last twenty-five years, phenomena such as Hypertext, Photoshop, Facebook, and YouTube continue the expansion of the visual. Today, images float more freely, surround us more plentifully, and appear on a wider variety of screens than ever before. And still, as Mitchell argues, we know little about how to interpret images and “how they operate” in our lives.

Compounding this predicament, some postmodern critics downplay deep ethical and ontological questions related to image production and viewing. Instead, given the dominance of the visual, some critics contend that images have mediated and even replaced our knowledge of the real. This article, inspired by an

<sup>1</sup>W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 13.

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honors course, Word and Image, taught in Christ College at Valparaiso University, argues that we need better strategies for thinking critically about images, their meaning, and our obligations as viewers. Drawing on a range of theorists, including Jean Baudrillard, Susan Sontag, Plato, and St. John of Damascus, this essay reengages theological, ethical, and ontological questions about the ways images shape meaning in the world to help us reclaim our agency as critical thinkers and skeptical viewers. To this end, the multidisciplinary readings and approach taken in our Word and Image course serve as a crucible, one that challenges the insufficiencies of the postmodern response to visual culture and strives instead to develop what Diana Eck calls “a hermeneutic of the visible.”<sup>2</sup> Examples drawn from course texts and student learning demonstrate the need to engage a range of perspectives—including the ethical, cultural, theological, and aesthetic—as we strive to become critical interpreters of our visual world, better equipped to address “the problem of how we understand and interpret what we see.”<sup>3</sup>

#### AUTHORITY: WHO CONTROLS IMAGES AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?<sup>4</sup>

Plato’s *Republic* investigates a range of questions vital to the study of visual culture: What is the relationship of images to truth? Do the images we see and the texts we read have the power to change us? What effect does art have on an individual’s perception of self and the world? At first, *The Republic* may not seem applicable to an investigation of images. After all, Plato infamously banishes all imaginative art at the end of his account of an ideal Republic, with the exceptions of “eulogies of praise” and “hymns to the gods.”<sup>5</sup> We would be remiss, though, if we closed the book here. Indeed, Plato doesn’t denounce art because he regards images as trivial or meaningless; rather, it is the persuasive power of art, its capacity to sway us emotionally and intellectually, that concerns him. As such, Plato’s arguments offer important lenses by which to reconsider the social power of art today—its ability to influence us, confuse us, and transform us.

In Book Three, Socrates posits two charges against Homer’s poetry that speak to his larger concerns with art. First, in terms of content, Homer’s poems exaggerate human virtue and vice while using language that appeals multivalently to the audience’s imagination, reason, and emotions. Such art has the power to deeply influence our “malleable” minds and souls, distracting us from reason and entertaining us instead with exaggerated portraits. Second, Plato takes issue with

<sup>2</sup>Diana L. Eck, *Darsan: Seeing the Divine in India*, 3rd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) 14.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. I extend Eck’s account of visual hermeneutics within religious traditions to include images in the secular realm.

<sup>4</sup>Gretchen Buggeln, “Introduction to Word and Image” (Lecture, August 24, 2011). I am grateful to Gretchen Buggeln for the subtitles for this paper and for her leadership as coordinator of Word and Image in Christ College. I am also thankful for the wonderful colleagues with whom I have taught Word and Image, including David Morgan, Bill Olmsted, Scott Huelin, Gretchen Buggeln, Samuel Graber, and Jennifer Miller. Finally, thank you to the many students of Word and Image for their fine insights and critical vision. Special thanks go to Nicholas Derda, Sarah Peters, and Ian Roseen for permitting me to quote from their work.

<sup>5</sup>Plato, *The Republic*, 2nd ed., trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992) 607A.

the ways that Homer's poems were memorized and performed by rhapsodes, ensuring that their exaggerated accounts of virtue and vice would become internalized by performers.

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If such charges could be leveled against the influence of art in the ancient world, then what happens when we apply Plato's arguments to the content and messages of the mass media today? Certainly, popular visual culture presents us with confusing, suspicious, and often immoral content. The sheer predominance and speed of today's media ensures that its messages are often repeated, easily digestible, and therefore prone to internalization by viewers. While many today assume that we should ask probing questions about the kinds of art we give to children, those to whom Plato ascribes the "most malleable" minds,<sup>6</sup> shouldn't we also question the ways that art molds all of us—the young, old, and middle-aged? What effect, for instance, does playing *Minecraft*, a video game in which users participate in an alternative reality, have on one's perspective on the world? When we watch a graphic rape scene portrayed on film, shouldn't we pause to consider how this influences our notion of violence, of human nature? And what about the commercial images that Americans see on a daily basis: How do these images contribute to our sense of what is good or desirable?

The relevance of Plato's arguments for contemporary visual culture comes through in Nicholas Derda's essay on "Wearable Justice." Derda analyzes the marketing of bracelets, T-shirts, and other goods that promote social causes, highlighting the problematic ways that images, consumerism, and social justice can be linked today. Derda writes:

Today products [of "wearable justice"] can be found at stores ranging from discount mega-merchandisers, such as Target and Walmart, to some of the finest haute couture fashion houses in Paris...While undoubtedly most of these products are well intentioned, with at least a portion of their proceeds going to support a respectable social cause, it is important that we ask ourselves just what kind of social justice these products are promoting. Is a wearable act of charity, such as a t-shirt that supports "HIV/AIDS education and prevention efforts," a just act or rather nothing more than a public billboard advertising one's benevolence? Is buying one of these products a tool for promoting social justice, or nothing more than an attempt to be trendy?...I will turn to one of the earliest commentaries made on this topic, Plato's *The Republic*...[in order] to show how today's advertisers are turning social justice into a good that is no

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 377B.

longer valued in and of itself, but rather for the benefits one reaps from maintaining a just appearance.<sup>7</sup>

A robust analysis of visual culture must include skeptical approaches like Plato's and Derda's, attuned to the ways that images can mislead and confuse. Of equal importance, though, is a focus on the ways that words and images, though fallible and imperfect, serve as conduits for truth and belief. Ian Roseen sums up nicely the powerful force that word and image can have when they open us up to the greater truths of the human experience:

[F]ew aspects of our current popular culture inspire in us thoughts of "the sublime." Like most of the things we encounter in day-to-day life, a lot of what we are subject to via the TV screen, the radio, or literature seems dimly small and temporary; what happens this week on *Jersey Shore* will in a couple of days be forgotten, and the latest song at the top of the Billboard Hot 100 will only be [replaced weeks later]...[whereas Edmund Burke's definition of the sublime offers]<sup>8</sup> a study of the vast and terrible things that strike feelings of awe within us.... What we get out of [the sublime] is an experience that reminds us of our own humanity—the ugliness, the smallness, and the ever-present potential for destruction. There is a painful sort of pleasure to be had from this experience, and while there may not be anything particularly beautiful about it, we nevertheless are made to take part of something that is beyond beautiful, that is instead awesome, dangerous, and sublime.<sup>9</sup>

What Roseen argues about the sublime resonates well with the powerful and often mysterious role that images play within faith traditions. According to the eighth-century theologian St. John of Damascus in *On the Divine Images*, word and image are essential to the sacred narratives and embodied practices of Christian worship. Writing against the imperial ban of images by the Byzantine Emperor Leo III, St. John defended icons on the grounds of the incarnation. In doing so, St. John collapses the Platonic division between the material and the intelligible worlds on the grounds that "the Creator" was made man and "came down to his creation without being lowered or weakened, that he might glorify my nature and bring about communion with the divine nature."<sup>10</sup> Moreover, because we are human and material beings, St. John asserts that the entirety of Christian worship and knowledge of the divine depends on physical, representational forms:

For since we are twofold, fashioned of soul and body, and our soul is not naked but, as it were, covered by a mantle, it is impossible for us to reach what is intelligible apart from what is bodily. Just as therefore through words perceived by

<sup>7</sup>Nicholas Derda, "Wearable Justice" (paper, Christ College Student Scholarship Symposium, Valparaiso University, Spring 2010). All quotations from student papers in this essay are used with permission of the authors.

<sup>8</sup>Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1756–1757), at <http://www.bartleby.com/24/2> (accessed April 20, 2012).

<sup>9</sup>Ian Roseen, "Let It Be Dangerous: Finding the Sublime in The Replacements" (class paper, Valparaiso University, 2010) 2.

<sup>10</sup>St. John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, trans. Andrew Louth (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003) 86.

the senses we hear with bodily ears and understand what is spiritual, so through bodily vision we come to spiritual contemplation. For this reason Christ assumed body and soul, since human kind consists of body and soul; therefore also baptism is twofold, of water and the Spirit; as well as communion and prayer and psalmody, all of them twofold, bodily and spiritual, and offerings of light and incense.<sup>11</sup>

In this account, St. John radically breaks free from the either/or typologies by which image/word studies often function, since the physical entrance of God into the world as Christ promises to radically redeem all aspects of our fallenness, including the fallible representational forms through which we honor and worship the divine.

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Examining the role of visual images within faith traditions—whether in the Christian iconoclastic debates or the Hindu practice of “darsan” (that is, of seeing and receiving the gaze of the divine)—gives us important perspective on the power and problems of visual representation. Images have the capacity to operate not only as barriers to the truth (as Plato worries) but also as conveyers of our most sacred beliefs and deepest mysteries. Studying how sacred images circulate within faith traditions—how they are made, who uses them, for what purposes, shaped by what ideologies—allows us to look closely at how the basic building blocks of word and image serve the human quest to know and believe. Even Martin Luther, aware of the political uses and abuses of images, conceded the powerful and inescapable role that images play in the life of believers. He writes:

Of this I am certain, that God desires to have his works heard and read, especially the passion of the Lord. But it is impossible for me to hear it and bear it in mind without forming mental images of it in my heart. For whether I will or not, when I hear of Christ, an image of a man hanging on a cross takes form in my heart, just as the reflection of my face naturally appears in the water when I look into it.<sup>12</sup>

#### SUBJECTIVITY: HOW DO IMAGES MAKE US FEEL AND KNOW?

During the modern period, a profound shift takes place in the understanding of what constitutes art and its interpretation. Former quests for universal authority over image production, as found in Plato’s dialogues or the iconoclastic debates, give way to an account of art firmly located inside an individual’s imagination and perception. From the late eighteenth century onward, the sources for art

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 93.

<sup>12</sup>Martin Luther, “Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments” (1525), in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 40, ed. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958) 99–100.

and truth move inside the individual and thus reside in “the eye of the beholder.” Realist artists of the nineteenth century, such as Rebecca Harding Davis, who wrote the first work of American realism in 1861, and Jacob Riis, a late-nineteenth-century photojournalist, detail the problems and possibilities of this subjective turn.

Davis’s novella, *Life in the Iron Mills*, and Riis’s graphic account of the lives of the poor in New York in *How the Other Half Lives* reveal the capability of art to not only reflect the gruesome realities of social injustice but also to transform how an audience comes to regard their ethical responses to these realities. Davis’s *Life in the Iron Mills*, published by a woman journalist on the eve of the Civil War, details the stark, unimaginable conditions of an ironworker’s fourteen-hour-day work life. Through her visual realism, we come to empathize with the protagonist’s passion for art as he crafts sculptures from kohl, the refuse from iron production. We feel his emotions, are privy to his thoughts, and enter into his dreams for a better life. Driving home the point, the unnamed narrator directly addresses the readers, challenging us to abandon perspectives that would distance us from the ironworker’s plight. Instead, the narrator urges us to adopt an inclusive, Christian vision of the ironworker Hugh Wolfe’s life, as is evident early in the novella:

Be just: when I tell you about this night, see him as he is. Be just,—not like man’s law, which seizes on one isolated fact, but like God’s judging angel, whose clear, sad eye saw all the countless cankering days of this man’s life, all the countless nights, when, sick with starving, his soul fainted in him, before it judged him for this night, the saddest of all.<sup>13</sup>

Here, Davis not only challenges the reader to “look” at the lives of the poor, but she also urges us to consider *how* we regard the meaning of their lives. “Look with me,” she insists, not according to the laws of prejudice and culture, but rather holistically and empathetically. Only with “just eyes,” Davis’s narrator urges, will we avoid making spectacle of a tragic plight of a poor man and instead look toward the human costs and claims that this portrait evokes.

Jacob Riis, a photojournalist documenting the lives of the poor in New York at the turn of the century, employs similar strategies by which to prompt a middle-class audience toward “moral vision.” Riis photographs the poor within their homes, in their most private and intimate spaces. The depth of this intimacy is amplified by the photographic convention of the close-up. By employing these visual strategies, Riis brings viewers close enough to see the grittiness of the living conditions and near enough to glimpse the humanity of his subjects. The narratives accompanying his images further this intimacy, as is exemplified by the following excerpt:

The man, his wife, and three small children [were] shivering in one room through the roof of which the pitiless winds of winter whistled. The room was almost barren of furniture; the parents slept on the floor, the elder children in

<sup>13</sup>Rebecca Harding Davis, *Life in the Iron-Mills*, ed. Celia Tichi (New York: Bedford, 1998) 49.

boxes, and the baby was swung in an old shawl attached to the rafters by cords by way of a hammock. The father, a seaman, had been obliged to give up that calling because he was in consumption, and was unable to provide either bread or fire for his little ones.<sup>14</sup>

When image and text are read together, the visible spectacle of the poor in the photographs is transformed into a human story of caregiving and home life, ambitions and illness, husbands and wives, work and love. Davis's and Riis's explicit portrayals of the poor raise powerful questions about the relationship of images to knowledge and empathy, prompting us to ask what it means to look at the ugly, the suffering, the unjust in art. Are realistic depictions of suffering capable of compelling us to "moral vision"? Are other kinds of vision potentially invoked by this project—surveillance, voyeurism, cynicism? Are there important differences in how narrative and photographic language convey suffering and direct our gaze?

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Such questions led one student, Sarah Peters, to argue that postmodern authors and readers would do well to return to the kinds of vision and social justice emphasized by nineteenth-century social realists. Peters took issue with Joe Sacco's graphic novel *Palestine*,<sup>15</sup> which chronicles the plight of Palestinians, because it foregrounds the author's cynical reaction to the suffering he records. She argues:

[Sacco] has seen scars, and now it is time to collect other people's stories. [And yet] he is more concerned with the collection of the stories and the time to collect them than with feeling for the suffering of others, which one could argue prevents him from seeing with "just eyes." Some might argue that the Palestinian conflict is confusing and disorienting, so Sacco was not demonstrating cynicism, but simple truth, in these scenes. What more could he do, but offer his perspective through a cartoon?...But what use is it to do one's "very limited bit" if there is no hope for social change? Without hope there is no reason to go and see the suffering of others.<sup>16</sup>

#### POSTMODERNITY: WHEN THE SCALE TIPS IN FAVOR OF THE VISUAL, WHAT HAPPENS TO INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES?

Sarah Peters's gesture to reengage ethical questions of postmodern texts shows us why a multifaceted, historically situated study of visual culture is impor-

<sup>14</sup>Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (New York: Sagamore, 1957) 35–36. To see this image, go to <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma01/davis/photography/images/riisphotos/slideshow1.html> (accessed May 8, 2012).

<sup>15</sup>Joe Sacco, *Palestine* (New York: Fantagraphics Books, 2001).

<sup>16</sup>Sarah Peters, "Weakness of Character: Emotional Vision and Social Reform" (class paper, Valparaiso University, Fall 2009).

tant. This gesture is especially important today when contemporary critics tend to foreground the dominance of the image and disregard ethical questions related to viewing. This is not to suggest the critics do not find meaning in images produced in the age of mechanical reproduction. John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* argues that images have not only come to predominate in our culture, but they also profoundly shape our “ways of seeing.” Free-floating images endlessly copied on coffee mugs, posters, and computer screens take on a life of their own. “For the first time ever,” Berger contends, “images of art have become ephemeral, ubiquitous...available, valueless, free.”<sup>17</sup> Though “valueless” in their “ubiquitousness,” images are not merely an ornate backdrop for postmodern existence; rather, they reflect and perpetuate cultural beliefs.<sup>18</sup>

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For some postmodern theorists, such as Guy DeBord and Jean Baudrillard, the central question becomes not whether mass-produced images degrade us or free us, but rather whether or not they have totally usurped the possibility of knowing anything outside of the spectacle they create. The dominance of the image has profoundly influenced human consciousness, according to Baudrillard, so much so that there no longer exists a clear break between representation and reality.<sup>19</sup> According to Baudrillard, the elaborate spectacles of the postmodern age (most famously Disneyland) are so ornate and influential that they become a reality unto themselves. Given the “hyperreality” of the visual world, it follows for postmodern critics that images dominate our notions of what is real and usurp our agency as viewers. As DeBord famously asserts, “All that was once directly lived has become mere representation.”<sup>20</sup>

Given the ways that visual images permeate our everyday lives, it’s not difficult to find some validity in the postmodern stance. Even a cursory look at visual media today—whether the wonderful world of Disney, advertisements, reality television, or the Internet—would show us how images can have a meaning all their own and are capable of mediating (if not supplanting) our sense of the real. If the postmodernist’s position is true, though, then we can never achieve an inquiring, skeptical vantage point from which to evaluate this age of the spectacle. This perspective is not without its critics. As Susan Sontag, who examines the moral and political meaning of war photographs in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, asserts:

<sup>17</sup>John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972) 32.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>19</sup>See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

<sup>20</sup>Guy DeBord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994) 12.



To speak of reality becoming spectacle is a breath-taking provincialism. It universalizes the viewing habits of a small, educated population living in the rich part of the world [and]...assumes that everyone is a spectator. It suggests, perversely, unseriously, that there is no real suffering in the world.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, for Sontag, images continue to exist as “an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine” the layers of meanings they reflect and construct.<sup>22</sup> And when it comes to photographs of war and suffering, Sontag refuses to admit that all is spectacle. She argues that looking at images of suffering should always be a moral act, requiring us to ask hard questions about what it means to produce, circulate, and view the image of another’s pain.

Like Sontag, many students in *Word and Image* refuse to let the postmodernists have the final word. Indeed, it is when we discuss postmodern visual culture at semester’s end that we find ourselves most urgently reengaging with the ethical, ontological, and theological questions raised by earlier theorists. In this era in which images predominate, we find we must engage anew the questions that Plato, St. John, Luther, Sontag, and others raised about the power of images to mislead and teach, to convey truths and confuse us. Equipped with these ethical, historical, and theological lenses, we ask: How can we become more questioning, critical viewers in an age that makes so many passive consumers of images? How can we develop strategies for skeptical viewing? How can we become more attentive to the messages that images construct and reflect?

In order to illustrate the fruits of this inquiry, I close with two examples of critical thinking and skeptical viewing found in student essays. In the first instance, Ian Roseen demonstrates the payoff that comes from interpreting an image attentively. Through his careful analysis, a seemingly mundane album cover becomes revelatory:<sup>23</sup>

The cover artwork of *Let It Be* poses a similar threat to our mild range of everyday experiences and contains elements of danger as well....At first glance, there does not seem to be much to notice about this image of four guys sitting on a roof somewhere, ambiguously carrying on a conversation. But there is a lot more going on in this picture, especially when we consider the fact that the house the band is sitting on top of belonged to the mother of Bob and Tommy Stinson, the guitarist and bassist, respectively.

What this suggests is a matter-of-fact type of rebellion against familiar conventions, which might include suburbia, parental control, or even a respectable way of presenting oneself. Here we have four young punks in mismatched, ill-fitting clothing, with tired eyes and disagreeable hair, sitting on *top* of a place we typically associate with safety and consistency—the quiet suburban home of somebody’s mother. They have taken the confines of a traditional image and placed themselves in a position of authority over it, their dark cloth-

<sup>21</sup>Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2004) 110.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>23</sup>To view the image, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Let\\_It\\_Be\\_%28The\\_Replacements\\_album%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Let_It_Be_%28The_Replacements_album%29) (accessed May 8, 2012).

ing contrasting sharply with the mild gray of the house. Moreover, the decision to take the picture on the roof of the house as opposed to in front of it or even inside of it also carries with it an element of the sublime. [Edmund] Burke says, "...height is less grand than depth... we are more struck at looking down from a precipice, than looking up at an object of equal height..."<sup>24</sup> and although we are unable to gaze down from the roof ourselves, we are placed on an equal level of height with The Replacements, as though we are right beside them, teetering on the edge of treacherous vastness.<sup>25</sup>

And finally, Nicholas Derda's conclusion to his essay exemplifies the importance of asking a range of critical questions about today's visual media, especially when its messages are as complicated as those comprising the trend he calls "wearable justice":

While the products I have been discussing do encourage us to believe that maintaining a just appearance is more valuable than justice in and of itself, the fact cannot be ignored that they are simultaneously helping the social causes they [endorse].... This leaves us in a rather difficult situation.... Some may argue that we might as well use our clothing as a billboard to advertise social causes and our personal benevolence. We have to wear clothes anyway, right? So why not just wear clothing with a social message? While I see the logic of this argument, it still seems like too simple of a solution for a complicated problem. As I see it, one of the only options we have is to turn to platonic... reasoning. Before buying that t-shirt that benefits a social cause, we should ask ourselves why we are buying it. Are we buying the shirt because we really care about HIV/AIDS or because we want others to think we care? If we really do care, then perhaps we can use the shirt to spread the message about this pressing issue. But if HIV/AIDS is of little importance to us, then maybe our money would be better spent benefitting a cause we care about. If wearable acts of charity are purchased because we value justice in and of itself and because of its consequences, then perhaps these products are not as dangerous as they at first appear. However, until t-shirts and fashion accessories can be viewed as something more than a fad that is "in this season" and may be out the next, we should think twice before purchasing them.<sup>26</sup>

Because the visual is inescapable and powerful, as these student essays and Luther's own words remind us, it is vital that we become more reflective about how we encounter, receive, and are influenced by the images that surround us. ⊕

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<sup>24</sup>Ed. note: See Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry*, II.8.

<sup>25</sup>Rosen, "Let It Be Dangerous," 6–7.

<sup>26</sup>Derda, "Wearable Justice," 7.