Course Description

Word and Image introduces students to problems in the history of visual and literary representation from Plato to the present. The central questions are: By what means do we make our thoughts and beliefs known to others, as representation in its many forms? How do we, and should we, interpret the representations of our fellow human beings?

In the holistic spirit of Christ College, Word and Image is interdisciplinary and ethically engaged. We consider many types of “texts” (photography, poetry, novels, plays, painting and drawing, landscape, film, graphic novels, museums, public art) and we apply methods of visual, textual, and cultural analysis derived from many different disciplines. Students learn to articulate historically-grounded critiques of the nature, forms, social practice, and social influence of representations.

The course works from a common syllabus, but one that is flexible according to the strengths and interests of the faculty. Individual discussion sections (of no more than 18 students) meet several times a week, and there is also a weekly plenary lecture given by one of the faculty or a guest speaker. In addition to written assignments, students learn about the power of visual images by working in groups to create an argument in new media forms (we call this a “visual argument”).

Four Course Modules (2015)

1. The first questions the ability of images and text to convey “truth” or “justice.” Can images challenge us to be better, more complete, flourishing human beings? Is art an appropriate response to pain and suffering?

2. The second considers some historical and contemporary problems in the representation of the sacred and the use of images in worship and devotion. Does art enhance religious devotion, or does it merely distract the believer?

3. The third section explores the rise of modern ways of subjective seeing and representing, with a particular emphasis on the traveler. Can I truly “see for myself,” without the intermediation of society and culture? How do my intellect, emotions, and experience work together to frame what I see?

4. Finally, we turn our attention to the contemporary world, with its multiplicity of images and perspectives. Is there still a “real thing” behind the endless layers of representation?