Virtual Reality. Augmented Reality. 360° video. Computer-generated visual effects. “Born digital” photographs. Interactive and immersive media environments. It seems to be now more possible than ever to convincingly re-create the world around us in representation. But how did we get here? This class traces a history of the creative impulse to visually replicate, reproduce, and represent the experience of reality, asking students to think critically about historical pictorial traditions for imagining and imaging the real.

What does it mean to represent reality? What has it meant historically? For some, it might mean the effort to more accurately capture the way we see the world, from the Renaissance invention of linear perspective, to Impressionist experiments with subjective vision, to a variety of modern photographic technologies. For others, representing reality has more to do with an attempt to visualize the real social experience of everyday people and subjects, an often-explicitly-political project that extends from artists like Caravaggio to nineteenth- and twentieth-century Realisms. While not an exhaustive survey, this class will look at these questions over a broad timeframe and geographic scope, always striving to make concrete links between historical and contemporary issues.