Experiencing the Real
Nature, Culture, Society

Summary:
An essential and obvious – if little remarked-upon – aspect of our work as scholars and students within an academic community is that we are generally concerned with that which is real. We read about things that are real. We write about things that are real. We attempt to prove the realities of our theories and we theorize the real.

But what is it like to take “the real” as a question not simply of text or theory, but of experience? In this course, we will immerse ourselves in some of the many ways in which we (human beings living in an industrialized society in the early twenty-first century) have come to know what is real, and to distinguish it from that which is unreal, ambiguous, or even fake. Equal parts ethnography, history, reportage, philosophy, and fabrication, this course takes action and embodiment as its key elements – particularly action and embodiment as manifested through the sometimes-twinned, sometimes-conflicting pursuits of science and art.

Each class session will feature a “practicum” in which students will participate in different activities designed to move our understanding of “the real” from one based in text and cerebration, to one based in a more direct experience (or manipulation of experience) of the real. In considering the nature of the real, we will conduct experiments in psychology and probability, meet with museum exhibitors and curators, visit virtual reality labs and sensory isolation chambers, and speak with artists and political pundits among other activities. Along the way, we will consider our own embodiment and cognition in conjunction with the material and technological worlds of our own late modern moment as principle elements of the ways in which we come to know the real.

Time and Place:
Spring Term. Fridays from 9:30 to 12:30
IFK Classroom

Requirements:

Participation
Students will be expected to attend class and participate fully in the class activities and discussions.

At intervals throughout the course, students will be asked to briefly record their impressions of an encounter, a visit, or an experience, or to ask questions of an interlocutor. These assignments will be counted as part of the “participation” grade.

The Poster Session

As part of the practical arc of the course, students will be asked to conceptualize a problem of investigating the real; to propose a solution to this problem; and to make a poster presenting the
problem and its solution to their peers. We will view and discuss all of these proposals at a special poster session during our final class. This project will be pursued in three stages. Each will be graded.

April 26: ideas for poster due (Prompt: what is your question? why/how does it matter?)

May 17: execution of idea due (Prompt: How will you attempt to answer your question? What evidence will you use? What are your methodological assumptions?)

June 7: Final project due. Poster session, top floor of IFK.

Grade Breakdown

Participation: 40%
Poster: 60%

Schedule

Section I: What is “the Real”?

APRIL 5 Week 1: Consciousness and the Substrate of the Brain
Beyond philosophical considerations and schools – materialism, idealism, monism, etc. – where does “the real” reside? In this session, we will examine cognitive approaches to thinking about the real, working with classic illusions in psychology, as well as contemporary experiments in neurosciences.

Practicum: Students will participate in different sensory illusions; record results; discuss hypotheses.

Readings: TBD

APRIL 12 Week 2: Making Models
How do we come to know results of our observations as real? Especially in modern sciences – though in numerous other areas of human endeavor as well – validating that which is real is more often than not a matter that transcends the human sensorium. From technologies such as fMRI in neuroscience research, to the use of statistics in social sciences and government, simple observation is rarely sufficient to ground belief in the real. In this session, we will examine different techniques for validating the real, beyond the direct observation of our senses.

Practicum: How do we know when our models are correct? Students will toss dice and make probabilistic hypotheses as to the results.

Readings: TBD

APRIL 19 Week 3: What Counts as Evidence?
It is all well to have many different techniques for making models of the real – but how do we populate and validate our models? In this session, we will examine the question of what counts as evidence – from aggregate accumulation of evidence to “golden events” – and what counts (therefore) as a good model.
Practicum: students will work with different statistical models of the same phenomena in order to experience how small shifts in the design of a model can prove radically different phenomena.


SECTION II: APPLICATIONS

APRIL 26  Week 4:  Natural History  ASSIGNMENT 1 DUE BEFORE CLASS

Having discussed different ways of understanding models and evidence, in this section of the course we will begin to examine how these understandings play out in application. Our point of departure will be the historically conjoined fields of natural history and biology, where we will consider problems of evidence and understanding vis-à-vis biological complexity. How do we understand and catalog the diversity of life on earth? And how do we convey that diversity to both scientific and non-scientific publics? How do our historical understandings of the relationships between organisms – including human beings – influence our scientific understandings of fundamental questions in biology and natural history?

Practicum: a visit to the Field Museum to meet with exhibit designers and curators.

Readings: Haraway, “Teddy Bear Patriarchy”? (on the ways that natural history recapitulated social norms of the early 20th century)

Bowker and Star, *Sorting things Out*, on taxonomy

MAY 3  Week 5:  Cosmos

From the terrestrial and tangible, we move to the transcendent and sublime, asking how we understand things that are simultaneously real, but beyond the scale of human experience and understanding.

Practicum: TBD/visit to Adler Planetarium

Readings:

Messeri, excerpt from *Placing Outer Space*,

Hacking, *Representing and Intervening* (“if you can spray them, they are real”)

MAY 10  Week 6:  Isolation

We have considered the evidence of the senses, but what reality inheres when the senses are arrested? This is a question which has animated philosophers for centuries, and one which gained a technological addendum in the mid twentieth century with the invention of the sensory isolation chamber. In this session, we will discuss the implications and assumptions in discourse about sensory isolation, and its meaning for what some 1960s researchers called “the human biocomputer.”

Practicum: trip to sensory isolation chambers. Students will keep track of and record their experiences to be discussed in class.

Readings:
III: Community

MAY 17  Week 7:  Virtual Media  ASSIGNMENT 2 DUE BEFORE CLASS
In this session, we will move towards an examination of “the real” as it organizes social life (in the United States in the early 21st century). We will be particularly interested in the reality of social media, broadly construed – examining questions of fake news and fake Facebook accounts, as well as virtual presence and virtual realities as organizing elements of a social function. How should we behave? What sorts of presuppositions – from trust, to human nature, to the permanence of the real itself – dictate our actions, both alone and in conjunction with other human beings? These are both philosophical questions, as well as matters of understanding the empirical real.

Practicum: visit to VR laboratory at UIC. Students will participate in VR experiments/ record and discuss the results.

Readings:
Sherry Turkel, Alone Together? (2011?)

MAY 24  Week 8:  Bias
Taking action is where the rubber meets the road of the real. In our previous session we considered individual action. This week we consider political action. How should we set good policies? What suppositions – both conscious and unrealized – can skew our views of the real?

Practicum: Statistician and writer Nate Silver of the New York Times and 538.com will meet with students to discuss the problem of bias in information collection.

Readings: TBD

MAY 31  Week 9:  Aesthetics
One of the key concepts that we have worked with this term is the idea that “the real” is not simply known or understood – it is experienced (even if not directly; it is experienced by others and shared). One way of thinking about experience is through the field of aesthetics: through querying how we respond affectively, emotionally, sensitively (etc). to sensory experience. In this session, we will delve into questions of aesthetics and the real.

Practicum: a studio visit with Luftwerk, a Chicago based duo of artists known for their light installations.

Readings: TBD

Goethe on Color
Newton on color?
Or something synthetic - Goethe vs. Newton history.
James Turrell interview. https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/james-turell
Kass, “Wisdom of disgust? ?

JUNE 3: Final project due – electronic file to be printed as poster.

JUNE 7 Week 10: Poster presentation in IFK presentation room