In this course, we will explore together the concept of culture as seen through its forms of communication. Beginning with the oral tradition, we will read Walter Ong’s work on orality and literacy to analyze Achebe’s, Things Fall Apart and Ruth Rendell’s A Judgement in Stone as well as the impact of writing on the spoken word as seen in Plato’s Phaedrus. Marshall McLuhan’s seminal work, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man will orient us towards the epistemological biases of different media and allow us to generate questions surrounding the impact of one medium on another. The course will conclude with an examination of digital culture in terms of its cognitive effects as described by Nicholas Carr in The Shallows along with a collection of articles that address issues of privacy and democracy. Our discussions will often focus on forms of communication as they have emerged historically as well as how they coexist in time. How do these technologies compete with one another and in so doing how are they transformed? Most importantly, how are we transformed in how and what we communicate to one another and to ourselves? Please try to raise meaningful questions which may have only approximate answers rather than seek exact answers to wrong questions.
COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Required texts:

Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word.

Plato, Phaedrus translated by Nehemas and Woodruff

Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart

Ruth Rendell, A Judgement in Stone


Nicholas Carr, The Shallows

For certain topics, there will be handouts of appropriate reading material. Selected films will be shown.

Attendance:

Attendance will be taken in every class. You are allowed 2 absences for the semester for which there is no penalty. If you exceed this number, you will need to speak to me and provide a valid reason for your absence. Excessive absences will result in a lowering of your grade. If you come to class 15 minutes late, it will count as half an absence.

Assignments and Grading Criteria:

You will be asked to write 3 response papers based on the readings and discussions in this course. Each paper must be at least 7-10 pages double-spaced. Suggested topics will be given for each paper along with the due dates. A valid reason must be provided for late papers.

Each paper is worth 30% of your grade (total 90%). Attendance and class participation which might include in-class writing assignments and occasional oral presentations will be worth 10% of your grade.

As a general rule, I prefer not to give an Incomplete grade for the course. An I grade will be given only under special circumstances and requires that the student has submitted at least some of the work required for the course.
Policy on Plagiarism:

“As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website [www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html] for a full description of the academic integrity policy.”

Readings and Class Session Topics:

All readings must be done prior to class. Please bring the assigned text to class.

Wednesday, September 7
Introductions and course overview
Setting goals for the semester

Read for Monday, September 12
Ong: Introduction and Chapter 1

Monday, September 12
Ong’s framework on technology
Definition of his terms
Orality of language

Read for Wednesday, September 14
Ong: Chapters 2 and 3

Wednesday, September 14
Characteristics of oral cultures

Read for Monday, September 19
Ong: Chapter 4
Monday, September 19
Technology and the structure of consciousness

Read for Wednesday, September 21
Ong: Chapter 5

Wednesday, September 21
Print and its impact on orality and writing

Read for Monday, September 26
Ong: Chapter 6

Monday, September 26
Structure of Narratives in oral cultures

Read for Wednesday, September 28
Ong: Chapter 7

Wednesday, September 28
Pros and cons of Ong’s ideas
Application of Ong to media

MONDAY, OCTOBER 3
FILM: BEING THERE

Wednesday, OCTOBER 5
Film: Being There

OCTOBER 10 NO CLASS

Read for Wednesday October 12
Rendell: A Judgement in Stone

Wednesday, October 12
Discussion of Rendell and Being There

Read for Monday, October 17
Achebe: Part I

Monday, October 17
Achebe’s use of oral language and narrative structure

Read for Wednesday, October 19
Achebe: Part II (finish book)
Wednesday, October 19
Analysis of Achebe: Literacy, Power and Colonization

Read for Monday, October 24
Plato: Phaedrus: Introduction to end of Socrates’ First Speech

Monday, October 24
Role of rhetoric in philosophy

Read for Wednesday, October 26
Plato: Finish Phaedrus

Wednesday, October 26
Rhetoric and persuasion

RESPONSE PAPER 1 DUE WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 26

Read for Monday, October 31
McLuhan: Introduction and Chapters 1 and 2

Monday, October 31
McLuhan’s framework for understanding media

Read for Wednesday, November 2
McLuhan: Chapters 3 and 4

Wednesday, November 2
McLuhan cont’d

Read for Monday November 7
McLuhan: Chapters 5, 6 and 7

Monday, November 7
McLuhan cont’d

Read for Wednesday, November 9
Handout on McLuhan

Wednesday, November 9
Application of McLuhan to contemporary media

Read for Monday, November 14
Carr: Prologue, Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4
Monday, November 14
Discussion of Carr’s ideas

Read for Wednesday, November 16
Carr: Chapters 5, 6, 7

Wednesday, November 16
Discussion on Carr

Read for Monday, November 21
Carr: Chapters 8, 9, 10, Epilogue

RESPONSE PAPER 2 DUE MONDAY NOVEMBER 21

Monday, November 21
Critical assessment of Carr

Read for Wednesday, November 23
Handout by Adam Gopnik

Wednesday, November 23
Discussion of Gopnik

Read for Monday, November 28
Matt Richtel, Growing Up Digital, Wired for Distraction
Gary Wolf, The Data-Driven Life

Monday, November 28
Discussion of Richtel and Wolf

Read for Wednesday, November 30
Jeffrey Rosen, The Web Means the End of Forgetting and Rob Walker, Cyberspace When You’re Dead

Wednesday, November 30
Discussion of privacy and identity in a digital age

Read for Monday, December 5
Evgeny Morozov, The Google Doctrine and selected handouts

Monday, December 5
Discussion on democracy in a digital culture
Wednesday, December 7
Review of course texts

Monday, December 12
Reflections on ideas in the course

Wednesday, December 14
LAST CLASS: FINAL PAPER DUE

NO LATE PAPERS WILL BE ACCEPTED AFTER THE DEADLINE