

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

GALLATIN SCHOOL OF INDIVIDUALIZED STUDY

FALL 2008

K20.1193 CULTURE AS COMMUNICATION

MONDAYS AND WENDESDBAYS: 3:30-4:45

194 MERCER STREET ROOM 204

PROFESSOR VASU VARADHAN

OFFICE LOCATION: 715 BROADWAY, ROOM 417

OFFICE HOURS:

MONDAYS: 11:30-1:30

TELEPHONE: 212-992-7767

E-MAIL: VV2@NYU.EDU

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. We will discuss the convergence of old and new media in Henry Jenkins' book in terms of corporate control and grassroots efforts for a more democratic society. The course will conclude with an examination of contemporary media issues in American culture such as the role of the Internet in terms of privacy and intellectual property rights. We shall then speculate about the types of questions we need to ask about the newer technologies and their impact on us in terms 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 with one another and with 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*

Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man*.

Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*

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.

**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 5-7 pages double-spaced. Suggested topics will be given for each paper along with the due dates.

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.

**Readings and Class Session Topics:**

All readings must be done prior to class.

Wednesday, September 3  
Introductions and course overview  
Setting goals for the semester

**Read for Monday, September 8**  
**Ong: Introduction and Chapter 1**

Monday, September 8  
Ong's framework on technology  
Definition of his terms  
Orality of language

**Read for Wednesday, September 10**  
**Ong: Chapters 2 and 3**

Wednesday, September 10  
Characteristics of oral cultures

**Read for Monday, September 15**  
**Ong: Chapter 4**

Monday, September 15  
Technology and the structure of consciousness

**Read for Wednesday, September 17**  
**Ong: Chapter 5**

Wednesday, September 17  
Print and its impact on orality and writing

**Read for Monday, September 22**  
**Ong: Chapter 6**

Monday, September 22  
Structure of Narratives in oral cultures

**Read for Wednesday, September 24**  
**Ong: Chapter 7**

Wednesday, September 24  
Pros and cons of Ong's ideas  
Application of Ong to media

**Monday, September 29**

**Film: Being There**

**Wednesday, October 1**

**Film: Being There**

**Read for Monday, October 6**

**Rendell: A Judgement in Stone**

Monday, October 6

Analysis of Rendell's view on illiteracy

**Read for Wednesday, October 8**

**Achebe: Part I**

Wednesday, October 8

Achebe's use of oral language and narrative structure

MONDAY, OCTOBER 13 NO CLASS

**Read for Wednesday, October 15**

**Achebe: Part II (finish book)**

Wednesday, October 15

Analysis of Achebe: Literacy, Power and Colonization

**Read for Monday, October 20**

**Plato: Phaedrus: Introduction to end of Socrates' First Speech**

Monday, October 20

Role of rhetoric in philosophy

**Read for Wednesday, October 22**

**Plato: Finish Phaedrus**

Wednesday, October 22

Rhetoric and persuasion

**Monday, October 27**

**Discussion: Ong and Plato**

**Wednesday, October 29**

**Discussion: Achebe and Rendell**

**RESPONSE PAPER 1 DUE WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 29**

**Read for Monday, November 3**  
**McLuhan: Introduction and Chapters 1 and 2**

**Monday, November 3**  
**McLuhan's framework for understanding media**

**Read for Wednesday, November 5**  
**McLuhan: Chapters 3 and 4**

Wednesday, November 5  
McLuhan cont'd

**Read for Monday, November 10**  
**McLuhan: Chapters 5, 6 and 7**

Monday, November 10  
McLuhan cont'd

**Read for Wednesday, November 12**  
**Handouts on McLuhan**

Wednesday, November 12  
Assessing McLuhan's ideas  
Application to digital culture

Monday, November 17  
Film: Fahrenheit 451

Wednesday, November 19  
Film: Fahrenheit 451

Monday, November 24  
Discussion of Fahrenheit 451

Wednesday, November 26  
Book culture and the future of print

**RESPONSE PAPER 2 DUE MONDAY, DECEMBER 1**

**Read for MONDAY, December 1**  
**Jenkins: Introduction, Chapters 1 and 2**

Monday, December 1  
Reality television

Read for Wednesday, December 3

**Jenkins: Chapters 3 and 4**

Wednesday, December 3

Emerging media narratives

**Read for Monday, December 8**

**Jenkins: Chapters 5, 6 and Conclusion (Finish book)**

Monday, December 8

Literacy and new media

**Wednesday, December 10**

**LAST CLASS: CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS ON THE FUTURE OF  
MEDIA**

**FINAL PAPER DUE MONDAY, DECEMBER 15 BY NOON**

**NO LATE PAPERS ACCEPTED**