

WRITING WHITE ON BLACK

Modernism as Discursive Paradigm in South African Writing on
Modern Black Art

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I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

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Date:

Dedication:

To Ria for her dedicated proofreading and, above all, for her pervasive calm and perspective.

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I deconstruct key concepts, terminologies, and rhetorical conventions employed in white South African writing on modern black art. I trace the genealogy of the dominant discursive practices of the apartheid era to the cultural discourses of the colonial era, which in turn had their origins in the Enlightenment. This genealogical tracing aims to demonstrate that South African art writing of the 20th century partook of a tradition of Western writing that was primarily intent upon producing the Western subject as a rational Enlightenment agent via the debased objectification of the colonial Other. In the process of the deconstruction, I identify the most significant discursive shifts that occurred from the 1930's, when the first publications emerged, to the 1990's, when South Africa's new political dispensation opened up a different cultural landscape.

OPSOMMING

In hierdie tesis dekonstrueer ek die sleutelbegrippe, terminologieë en retoriese konvensies wat wit Suid-Afrikaanse kunsskrywers gebruik om oor moderne swart kuns te skryf. Ek deurgrond die genealogie van die dominante diskursiewe praktyke van die apartheidsera en spoor dit terug tot by die kulturele diskoerse van die koloniale tydperk, wat ek op hul beurt nagaan tot by hul oorsprong in die Verligting. Hierdie genealogiese ondersoek is bedoel om te demonstreer hoe 20^{ste}-eeuse kunsskrywers in Suid-Afrika aan 'n Westerse skryftradisie deelgeneem het wat hoofsaaklik daarop gerig was om, deur die vernederende objektivering van die koloniale Ander, die Westerse subjek as 'n rasidele agent van die Verligting uit te beeld. In hierdie proses van dekonstruksie identifiseer ek die belangrikste diskursiewe verskuiwings wat plaasgevind het van die 1930's, toe die eerste geskryfte gepubliseer is, tot die 1990's, toe die nuwe politieke bedeling in Suid-Afrika 'n veranderde kulturele landskap teweeg gebring het.

PREFACE

Years of developing courses on contemporary 'black' South African art taught me that, despite rhetorical and methodological differences in literatures dealing with this field, the texts all share a fundamental set of assumptions, characteristics and concerns. While there is a measure of heterogeneity as regards tone and expression, all share the tendency, for instance, to regard black artists' work as simultaneously the product of a universal human nature and a more specific African nature. All interpret the black artist's work as a mirror of a collective pan-African identity, and all expound ideas about the nature of 'The Black Man' and the nature of 'Black Art'. Virtually all [re]produce Africa as trope. Most are predicated on very similar ideas regarding urbanisation and modernisation. Identical sets of binary oppositions emerge: rural/urban, self-taught/educated, naive/sophisticated, authentic/aculturated, original/imitative, past/present, tradition/modernity.

When I started teaching courses on colonial representation a few years later, I encountered the same discourse, stripped of its distinctive 20th century liberalism. I found a more nakedly racist deployment of dualisms: civilized/barbaric, culture/nature, light/dark, Christian/pagan, rational/irrational, adult/childlike. I recognised that these discourses, some of them more than a hundred years apart, belong to the same discursive paradigm. In this thesis, I identify both discourses as belonging to a modernist episteme. With this in mind, I attempt a genealogical tracing of the most pervasive concepts, terminologies, rhetorical practices and philosophical conceits of South African 'white writing' on modern 'black' art.

INTRODUCTION

Re-writing ... is all the more important when writing has become institutionalized, a thing rather than a process, static instead of dynamic, a foundation for canonization, introducing fixed hierarchies, succumbing to the hegemony of certain discourses and the dictatorship of methodologies, a source for definitive labels, styles and genres, a basis for the exclusion of alternative ways of writing, cultivating the illusion of the self-contained art-object, of a universal aesthetic sensibility and of the timeless criteria for judging art (Degenaar 1987: 14).

The aim of this thesis is to examine 20th-century South African writings on modern black art. My contention is that these texts form part of a tradition of writing about African cultural production that can be traced back to the Enlightenment, and that they partake, as such, of a particular Western modernist episteme. Following Nietzsche and Foucault's deployment of genealogy to determine the 'moment of arising' of powerful epistemological and discursive practices, I attempt to trace the origins of the most definitive tropes and figures – particularly those pertaining to race, subjectivity and authorial knowledge – that these writings share. I am intent on uncovering the complex configuration of metaphors, descriptions, categories and rhetorical operations that produces knowledge about modern black art and promotes a certain canonical understanding of the topic.

As such, this research participates in the current trend of self-reflexive writing, where historians and intellectuals are guided by curiosity about the genealogies of their respective disciplines and their collective intellectual heritages.¹ Particularly in the West, with its recent (and continuing) history of cultural imperialism, this process of 'anthropologising' one's own discourses and cultural practices is essential to dismantle the normativity of Western practices and to render them 'exotic'. It is a kind of inquiry undertaken, to use Dubow's words, "not so much in the spirit of *mea culpa* as with a view to recognising [our]selves as historical agents and products" (1995: 5). Scholars in all fields of study have come to pay increasing attention to the significance of discourse in the constitution of fields of knowledge. This awareness of the power of discourse reflects what Atkinson (1990: 6) describes as a general 'linguistic turn' in the human sciences, which has engendered various methods of discourse analysis. Consciousness of the central importance of discourse in the production and reproduction of social and political

¹ Examples of such self-reflexive writings are Young's *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (1990), and Clifford and Marcus' *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986), both of which inspired and guided my approach. Local examples of such writing are Coetzee's *White Writing* (1988) and Dubow's *Illlicit Union: Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa* (1995).

hierarchies, demands that writers and academics pay close attention to their own textual practices.

Art historians have only relatively recently started acknowledging their discipline as constituting a social and epistemological technology which has been essential to the conception, fabrication, and maintenance of (originally European, subsequently all) modern nation states, and of the individual and collective identities that are staged as the supports and justifications for these political entities (Preziosi 1998: 13).

Preziosi argues:

As a keystone enterprise in making the visible legible, art history made of its legibilities a uniquely powerful medium for fabricating, sustaining, and transforming the identity and history of individuals and nations. The principle product of art history has thus been modernity itself (1998:18).

Only minor attempts have been made to investigate the role of art history and art discourses in the construction and maintenance of South African race hierarchies; South African modernity; and the imaginary body of the South African nation state.² I undertook this critical historiography of writing on modern black artists because I believe that these writings are particularly revealing of all the above. Nzegwu (1999: 391) suggests that:

In a historical period of re-examinations of traditional assumptions about forms of knowledge, visual representation, and artistic practice, a critical re-evaluation of old terminologies, interpretive frames, and justifications of Africa's twentieth-century contemporary art are very much in order, and sorely needed.

Dubow (1995: 6) laments the fact that such intellectual histories, or histories of social thought, are seriously underworked in South Africa, where they are particularly needed to uncover and deconstruct the "deep structures of thought and metaphor that underlie the process of Othering".

In critically deconstructing an entire corpus of literature, one inevitably runs the risk of being accused of intellectual arrogance and of exercising the same kind of authorial control that one is attempting to decentre. Implicitly, any such project pretends to be written by a coherent

² Examples include Nettleton's "...In what degree...(They) Are Possessed of Ornamental Taste" (1989) which briefly explores colonial perspectives on 'traditional' Southern African art; Rosen's deconstruction of writing about Mbatha (1993); and Rankin's articles on the South African art market (1990a & 1990b) and museums and galleries (1993 & 1997) that look at the marginalisation of black artists.

subject capable of grasping the entire text and its context from a position exterior to it. This presents a paradox in modernity critique, whose first and foremost intent is arguably to deconstruct the notion of the centred (Enlightenment) subject and his/her authoritative voice. Lawson calls the paradoxical nature of reflexivity the central predicament of Post-Modernism (1985). This paradox, as Herbert (1998: 226) points out, is particularly pronounced in Postcolonial theory where “the strategy of dissimulating the uncertainties of one’s own means of producing knowledge to attain a coherence and consistent voice akin to the absolute subject ... replicates the hubris of colonialism itself”.

It is also one of the paradoxes of deconstructive practice that one must perforce succumb to the prevailing Manichean binarisms that one is trying to unsettle. I am therefore acutely conscious that the very language I am so critical of - the language through which difference, race and ‘the primitive’ are constituted - is perversely duplicated and reified as I try to dismantle it. This problem, as Derrida (1978: 34) reminded Foucault,³ is effectively insurmountable:

[A]ll our European languages, the language of everything that has participated, from near or far, in the adventure of Western reason [are implicated] ... Nothing within this language, and no one among those who speak it, can escape ... [T]he revolution against reason can only be made within it ... [and] always has the limited scope of a disturbance.

My aim, therefore, is to create a disturbance in the tradition of South African art history, while, as far as possible, maintaining a measure of self-reflection and sustaining some kind of dialogic impulse to temper my authorial control. When Heidegger first coined the term ‘deconstruction’ (as combination of the concepts of ‘destruction’ and ‘retrieval’), he stressed the importance of establishing a relationship with one’s discipline that is simultaneously critical and respectful (Preziosi 1998: 397). To achieve this delicate balance, it is necessary to consider my own motivations for undertaking this ambitious and thorny project.

My deconstruction of apartheid era texts on modern black art proceeds from the acute sense of unease these writings have elicited in me since my earliest encounters with them in high school and university. In the almost exclusively Eurocentric art history syllabi taught in white South African schools in the 1970s, a small portion was reserved for South African art, and a

³ Apropos Foucault’s attempts (in *Madness and Civilization*) to analyse dementia while using the ‘restrained and restraining’ language of Western reason. See Derrida 1978.

very small and tightly circumscribed slice of that pie was reserved for black art. There was a paucity of writing on this topic, and the few texts that we were required to read tended to be general 'encyclopaedic' histories of South African art in which all contemporary black artists were lumped together under the rubric of 'township art'.

I studied art history at a liberal English university during the turbulent and repressive late 1970s and early 1980s. In keeping with an emerging revisionist art history abroad, and in response to increasing political pressure within, pioneering attempts were made to redress the Eurocentric focus of the existing art history syllabus at this outspokenly anti-apartheid institution, but the study of contemporary black South African art did not form part of that attempt.⁴ Still, I regularly encountered articles and newspaper reviews on modern black art and invariably felt an uncomfortable dis-ease with the paradoxical nature of the paternalistic humanism that framed these enquiries. This paternalistic humanism, which recognised culture as the product of a 'universal human nature', yet incessantly raised the spectre of irreconcilable cultural essences, was familiar to me since it echoed the texts I had been raised with. As the first generation South African daughter of Flemish immigrants who had fled the horrors of Europe during World War 2, I had imbibed my parents' post war humanist liberalism and distaste of the overt racism of their South African peers, but had simultaneously absorbed their colonial sense of African culture as something alien and primitive.

It was only when I conducted research for my Masters dissertation on the practice and ideology of community arts in South Africa, that I undertook a systematic reading of the extant corpus of publications on contemporary black art. I was struck by the rhetorical homogeneity of these texts and their remarkably consistent ideological presuppositions, but did not have the opportunity to address these within the confines of my Masters thesis. At the same time as I was conducting this research (in the stifling and tensely polarised political atmosphere of the state of emergency in the mid 1980s), a number of new publications emerged which heralded a significant break with the familiar liberal-paternalistic tone of extant writings on the topic. Emanating largely from the rebellious English universities (and thus mainly the product of white, anti-apartheid intellectuals), these texts sought to counter the disempowering objectification of 'black art' as curiosity and specimen, by situating black artistic practice in the radical context of 'the struggle'. These writings, of which my own masters and the publications that flowed from it formed part, were strongly informed by the Marxist methodology then dominant at

⁴ The University of the Witwatersrand, where I studied, introduced African art courses in 1977.

'progressive' English universities. These publications, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 5, mostly continued a typical Hegelian dialectic and often proposed a sharply dualistic and un-nuanced view of the South African art world.

In the mid 1980s, as a young lecturer at a correspondence university which taught students of all races, I undertook to develop courses on contemporary African art that attempted to circumvent the ideological biases and Eurocentric tone of existing research on the topic. These courses were motivated, in part, by part-time tutoring that I did at a college for black art students in the sprawling Johannesburg township of Soweto, where young black artists impressed upon me their anger and frustration at being labelled and marginalised by the white academic establishment. Since very few publications, locally or internationally, dealt with contemporary African art in a manner that I was content to transmit to my students unmediated, I ended up devoting most of my course to a critical reading of existing methodologies and texts. This critical reading gained impetus upon my excited 'discovery' of post-structuralism and deconstruction in the late 1980s⁵, and became more politically focused after my first encounter with postcolonial theories in the early 1990s.

In a sense, therefore, this thesis constitutes my own historiography as a white woman immersed since childhood in the ambivalent discourses of a self-legitimizing, colonising sector of the South African population. I now realise that the dis-ease generated by these texts was the result of the stormy and unstable political and intellectual climate in which I found myself as a young student – a climate in which the paradoxes, lies and rationalisations of the discourses I was raised with could no longer be sustained. Along with many fellow intellectuals of that generation, I sensed that a desperate revision or re-writing was needed to dislodge a paradigm that had moulded and shaped me, but that could no longer be practically supported or ethically entertained.

I also realise that my interest in earlier art historical discourses stems in part from an awareness of the changing role and status of academic discourse in our advanced-capitalist society.⁶ I am acutely conscious of the fact that academic discourse today performs a different

⁵ At the conference of the South African Association of Art Historians in 1987 (Stellenbosch), the philosopher Johan Degenaar read a post-structuralist paper titled 'writing and re-writing' which not only radically reorientated my own conception of culture and interpretation, but, I believe, significantly impacted on art historical practice in South Africa as a whole.

⁶ Bauman (1992: 21-24) made an illuminating but disconcertingly sobering observation about the current reorientation of the social function of intellectuals. Whereas intellectuals were indispensable to the early formulation of modernity when the modern state relied extensively on specialist expertise in the establishment of

role to the one it performed even a decade or two ago. This is particularly keenly felt in South Africa, where political urgency rather suddenly fell away as imperative (or incentive) for academic production. The loss of ideological purpose could lead to a sense of futility and paralysis. But the dispossession of the academic can also be regarded as the freeing of intellectual space – as an opportunity to hack away at the fossilised remains of elitist and damaging theories that have served dominant regimes for much too long. While I recognise that it is virtually impossible to pull oneself entirely out of certain hegemonic forms of Western thinking, this thesis aims at the gradual freeing of intellectual and cultural space by at least signposting some of its most insidious and persistent tropes and configurations. I am certainly not motivated by any kind of idealistic zeal to formulate a new theory that can accommodate contemporary Africa in all its complexity,⁷ nor by a desire for vengeful participation in the implosion of modernist intellectual self-confidence. Rather I embrace the freedom offered by my dispossession (as a white, middle-aged woman in postcolonial Africa and as an intellectual in a world that avers no need of intellectuals) as an opportunity to understand the deeply encoded scripts of my own past, and to help clear the page for a new generation of (hopefully young and black) writers to take up their pens.⁸

Before I proceed with an exposition of the main focus of this thesis, I need to clarify some of my textual practices. I use the terms ‘black art’, ‘black culture’, and ‘black Modernism’ to refer to the imaginary unity conferred upon the immense diversity of contemporary African art practices by generations of white writers who have taken for granted their collectivity and essential wholeness. I view ‘black art’ as I view ‘women’s art’: as discursive categories that have acquired an invidious solidity (metaphysics of presence) through centuries of use. The same

its powers, this dependency declined as the state consolidated its position - to the point where intellectuals are virtually redundant in contemporary late-modernity. Bauman suggests that, in fact, the dependency between state and intellectual is now totally reversed. Whereas intellectuals formerly launched their self-confident manifestos in an atmosphere of certainty and triumphant progress, they are now operating in a climate of dispossession and impotent economic dependence. The ‘intellectual freedom’ granted to academics is nothing less than a sign of the lack of practical consequence of the self-enclosed realm of the university. The intellectual who deals with culture is doubly dispossessed. The early modern intellectual played a vital role in the unfolding of modernity by launching the concept of refined, universal cultural standards that endowed the West with the confidence and missionary zeal it needed to colonise the globe. But as culture was gradually no longer needed to reproduce political power, and thus became no longer intimately tied to ideology, it was claimed as entertainment and commodity by a growing market-driven economy. Thus Bauman concludes that “the contemporary reorientation of cultural discourse can be best understood as a reflection on the changing experience of intellectuals, as they seek to re-establish their social function on a new ground in a world ill-fit for their traditional role” (Bauman 1992: 24).

⁷ In his critique of modernist epistemology, Rabinow warns that: “We do not need a theory of indigenous epistemologies or a new epistemology of the other. We should be attentive to our historical practice of projecting our cultural practices onto the other; at best, the task is to show how and when and through what cultural and institutional means other people started claiming epistemology for their own” (1986: 241).

⁸ It is appropriate that currently a new generation of black intellectuals, most of them members of the diaspora, have taken upon themselves the task of inscribing a new and distinctly radical space for contemporary African art production. I look at their writing, perforce very briefly, in the conclusion.

reservations apply to the term 'race', but all these terms and concepts are used so frequently in this thesis that quotation marks would have encumbered the text unnecessarily. I ask the reader to mentally apply the ironic distance conferred by quotation marks when they encounter these terms.

My use of the masculine pronoun in this thesis is always deliberate. I use it to refer to the Enlightenment subject because it was universally assumed that the rational, unitary subject could only be male. I also use it to refer to the modern black artist - partly in service of historical accuracy ⁹ - but mainly because, in the writings I refer to, the generic 'African artist' was always imagined as masculine.

It is also important to note that I make a distinction between the terms 'modernism' and 'Modernism' - the lower-case term 'modernism' is used as linguistic derivative of the term 'modernity', and the capitalised term 'Modernism' is used to denote the dominant Western cultural practices and theories of the late 19th and early to mid 20th centuries. I treat cultural Modernism as a discourse which participates in the broader modernist paradigm - in other words, as one of the many discourses of modernity. Problems arise, however, when the term 'modernism' or 'modernist' (as relating to modernity) falls at the beginning of a sentence, in which case it is, of course, capitalised. In those instances, I trust that readers will be able to infer which term is being referred to from the context.

My area of interest is as follows: while I touch where necessary on writings about 'traditional', 'tourist/curio', and 'transitional' art, my focus is mainly on South African writings about modern black art production: that is, on 20th-century South African art writing that attempts to explain, theorise about, and characterise black artists who deliberately created 'fine art' in the Western understanding of the term. The overwhelming majority of texts I look at were written by white South Africans. Although I do look at some discursive practices of black South African writers as I go along, it must be made clear that this is not my main objective. I look at black authors mainly where interesting or fruitful comparisons can be made. The issue of black-on-black writing in South Africa, with all the complex subjective stances and ambiguous modalities of compliance and resistance that it entails, is in its own right a fascinating topic that needs to

⁹ Until the 1980's, when Noria Mabasa and Bongi Dhlomo joined the ranks of modern black artists, black women artists to produce 'art' in the Western understanding of the term, were few and far between. Apart from Gladys Mgundlandlu, a handful of female artists were trained at Rorke's drift and Ndoleni Art School. Of all the writings I refer to in this thesis, only one mentions a female artist. It is only in the 'Resistance paradigm', that a more inclusive conception of 'the black artist' arose.

be researched, but this project arguably requires a measure of self-reflexivity that can only be undertaken by a black researcher.¹⁰

It will be demonstrated that colonial ideas regarding race, culture and Africa endure in white writing on black art, and that these tropes, ideas and ideological constructs are enmeshed with contemporary 20th-century Modernist art discourses and methodologies. Through a deconstruction of the ways in which the successive and overlapping cultural paradigms of Western colonial imperialism and Modernism are combined in these texts, I hope to demonstrate the underlying continuity and shared conceptual grounds between the two. Also: because these texts were attempts to come to terms with black artists who worked in (to use an indispensable misnomer) Western media and paradigms,¹¹ they afford insight into how black South Africans' negotiation of modernity was perceived and received by the dominant white minority culture. Finally, a critical reading of these texts demonstrates how the attempt to reconcile colonial ideas of race, culture and Africa with an artistic phenomenon which might have (or should have) challenged these ideas and tropes, led to ambivalences, aporias and contradictions in these texts.

The corpus of texts I deconstruct covers approximately six decades, from the 1930s to the 1990s. The reason for this temporal span is necessitated by the fact that the first publications and newspaper reviews about contemporary black art production in South Africa emerged in the 1930s; while the cut-off date of the early 1990s is provided by South Africa's reincorporation into a global academic environment after Nelson Mandela's release and the unbanning of oppositional African nationalist organisations. This cut-off date is not to suggest that historical periodisations and discursive shifts occur in a simple one-to-one relation. It must be noted that a discursive shift towards a 'post-apartheid/postcolonial' kind of art writing started much earlier, but gained momentum once the academic and cultural boycott was lifted. My thesis does not include post-apartheid writings, since this current era of cultural discourse in South Africa can, at the risk of drastic over-simplification, be deemed post-modern. I must add the reservation, however, that my understanding of post-modern discourse is that it can be described as a particular kind of late-modernism or hyper-modernism which displays a high level of awareness of some of the more blatant pitfalls of modernist discourse.

¹⁰ Two very good books exploring the topic of black subjectivities – their dialectics, dialogics and politics - are Gilroy's *'Black Atlantic'* (1993) and Wright's *'Becoming Black'* (2004), both of which focus on the black diaspora. There is, however, ample opportunity for fresh perspectives on black subjective modalities in South Africa during the colonial and apartheid eras.

¹¹ It is one of the effects of the totalising nature of Western modernity that the near-global manifestation of 20th-century Modernist methods and materials should continue to be referred to today as 'Western'.

To do a deconstruction of an entire corpus of intellectual thought, as I propose to do, one has to consider how ideas are transmitted. This, as Dubow (1995: 8) points out, is a much more complex process than is commonly supposed:

At any one moment there are an infinite number of ideas or thought-structures in formation. Whether these are picked up and made fashionable by intellectuals, cultural entrepreneurs or politicians is largely determined by the extent to which they may resonate with wider social concerns.

I endorse Dubow's proposition that texts are imbedded in a loose and unstable matrix or web of thought structures, rather than developed in direct response to readily identifiable or acknowledged intellectual influences. I might, therefore, find traces of structuralist theories in the writings of a South African academic who may, or may not, have actually read such theories. To play detective and ascertain the exact influences that impacted on any particular author would not only be impossible but would, moreover, to my mind, be valueless. It is also true that what is reflected in popular discourse is often a simplified or cruder version of academic theories, and that academics, in turn, often formulate theories to rationalise popular perceptions and prejudices. I therefore feel no compunction about identifying traces of remote and rarefied intellectual theories in popular texts, or vice versa. This confidence arises from the conviction that ideas and theoretical presuppositions often filter through and deposit themselves in texts without the author's conscious facilitation.

Chapter 1 grounds this thesis by providing a perforce very brief outline of the theories of discourse that inform my own deconstructive approach. Much has been written on the method of deconstruction and on the semiotic theories that gave rise to it. It would be pointless to provide an in-depth account of the mind-boggling complexities and numerous debates that characterise this field of enquiry. My very brief and truncated account is meant to provide the most basic theoretical foundation for this thesis and should certainly not be read as definitive.

In Chapter 2, I discuss modernism as discursive paradigm. As a comprehensive theory, definition, or history of modernity is neither possible nor necessary for the purposes of this thesis, I concentrate on the aspects of modernist thinking that impacted most powerfully on cultural discourses around the Other. Issues such as race, alterity and subjectivity are therefore more closely scrutinised than, for instance, debates about democracy, secularism, the patriarchal foundations of modernity, or ethics. Clearly, however, no in-depth analysis of the

theories of all the philosophers, anthropologists and scientists who contributed to these discourses can possibly be provided. I therefore select only aspects of particularly influential and canonical theories to characterise and define the modernist paradigm. My aim is to uncover certain constants that underlie virtually all modernist texts - constants such as, for instance, an implicit faith in progress and the teleological implications that this notion entails; the reliance on and perpetuation of Grand Narratives; and a particular set of assumptions regarding nature, culture and science.

This attempt to identify continuities should not, however, be read as a denial of the major discontinuities and ruptures that occurred in modernist discourse since its inception. The aim is certainly not to gloss over the vast heterogeneity of modernist texts, but rather to situate the continuities and grounds of modernity within the dynamic and chaotic web of modernist writing. The purpose of this 'survey' is to establish the persistent and constant characteristics of modernism, while tracing some of the most important paradigm shifts which accompanied historical events and new knowledges formulated by, *inter alia*, scientists, philosophers and theorists in general. While no in-depth historiography of modernity is possible, important theoretical 'discoveries' (such as Darwin's theory of evolution), which profoundly contributed to, and expanded the modernist paradigm, and which demonstrably affected interpretations of African material culture, are taken into account. I am acutely conscious of the risks involved in this exercise. Any such generalised identification of essential characteristics (of a discourse) runs the risk of diminishing an irreducibly complex phenomenon to a crude caricature. It is no more ethically acceptable, Rabinow reminds us, to Occidentalise than it is to Orientalise (1986: 241). I can only hope that this exposition of the most salient characteristics of the modernist episteme is not too reductive. I concede, however, that it is perforce selective – it stands to reason that I focused on those elements that most emphatically and demonstratively contributed towards 20th-century interpretations of modern black art. Although I drew my account of modernist discourse from a wide array of modernity critiques emanating from a range of disciplines (*inter alia* sociology, philosophy and linguistics), my critique of this discourse (and its manifestation in South African art writing in Chapter 4) is primarily informed by a postcolonial critical perspective which regards the practice of colonialism (with apartheid as a continuation of quintessentially colonial discourses and practices) as the ultimate enactment of the modernist episteme:

The rejection of the Cartesian individual, the instability of signification, the location of the subject in language or discourse, the dynamic operation of power: all these

familiar post-structuralist concepts emerge in post-colonial thought in different guises which nevertheless confirm the political agency of the colonised subject. Post-colonialism is not simply a kind of 'postmodernism with politics' – it is a sustained attention to the imperial process in colonial and neo-colonial societies, and an examination of the strategies to subvert the actual material and discursive effects of that process (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1995: 117).

This deconstructive account of modernist discourse recognises that postcolonial practice is probably the most pivotal point of departure for the decentring of the modernist episteme:

The politics of Post Structuralism forces the recognition that all knowledge may be variously contaminated, implicated in its very formal or 'objective' structures. This means that in particular colonial discourse analysis is not merely a marginal adjunct to more mainstream studies, a specialized activity only for minorities or for historians of imperialism and colonialism, but itself forms the point of questioning of Western knowledge's categories and assumptions (Young 1990: 11).

In Chapter 3, I explore 19th-century and 20th-century discourses on African material culture. In this survey I demonstrate that these discourses perpetuate and entrench the key modernist discursive conventions and tropes that I outlined in Chapter 2. This overview is undertaken mainly to sketch an intellectual frame for my later investigation of the discursive reception of 20th-century South African black art production, which perpetuated, as will be shown, the major presuppositions underpinning these writings. The aim is not to provide an exhaustive or comprehensive account of the great variety of inter-disciplinary descriptions and interpretations of African culture, but rather to identify the discursive consistencies shared by the heterogeneous body of texts under consideration. Representations of African material culture are by no means uniform in anthropological and art critical texts, yet it can be argued that prevailing assumptions and preconceptions regarding both Western and African culture can be uncovered within the heterogeneity of responses. Certain persistent notions about racial difference informed virtually all colonial (and neo-colonial) responses to African culture. I outline these characteristics largely to demonstrate that they belong to the modernist episteme defined in Chapter 2, and in order to establish discernable links between these discourses and apartheid-era writings. I do not aim, in this chapter, to provide an in-depth survey of writings on 'traditional' South African art in particular. The various travellers', missionaries' and scientists' descriptions of South African material culture, (which are thinly interspersed among general naturalist and anthropological narratives), by and large partake of the same broad

discursive characteristics.¹² I also consider 20th-century art critical interpretations of African material culture, notably the theories of Fry and Worringer, as they greatly influenced later interpretations of contemporary black art production. My investigation of these cultural theories is undertaken on the understanding that they partake liberally of the modernist discursive paradigm and that they exerted a particularly profound influence on South African art history. I finally take into account the emerging international genre of mid 20th-century writings about contemporary African art production, in order to assess, in Chapter 4, how these interpretations of the larger African context resonate with South African interpretations of modern black art.

Chapter 4, which deals with apartheid era discourses on black South African art, is the heart of my thesis. As it is not my aim to provide an exhaustive survey of literatures produced around modern black art, I have chosen to focus on a sample of texts. My criterion for selection was to provide coverage of as wide a range as possible of 'typical' writings, from the purely academic to the popular. Thus I chose articles and books by a core of authors (mostly academics) who published most prolifically on the topic and who, consequently, were (and mostly still are) regarded as 'experts' in the field. These canonical texts have been influential in academic circles and are frequently quoted in other writings. I have also included representative samples of articles from magazines that frequently covered 'black art production'. Most of these magazines (*Panorama*, *Informa*, *Bantu*) were sponsored by Government departments (for reasons that will be dealt with) and utilised the same writers repeatedly, so that a predictable and characteristic rhetoric developed. I also selected a variety of newspaper reviews and magazine 'stories' that, to my mind, represent typical popular coverage of black South African art. At the other end of the spectrum, I look at theses produced at a number of universities, ranging from liberal English universities to more conservative Afrikaans universities. A representative sample of catalogue essays and dictionary entries is also included.

I launch my discussion by sketching a much abbreviated historical context for the decades of the 1930s to the 1980s, which cover the emergence and consolidation of modern black art practice and the writings around it. This context is necessary since, as Dubow (1995: 6-7) cautions, textual deconstruction runs the risk of becoming self-referential and circular if

¹² I will, however, consider a few [mis]conceptions that apply specifically to appraisals of 'traditional' South African material culture (such as, inter alia, that Southern Africa was culturally impoverished in comparison to West and Central Africa) in Chapter 4, when I deconstruct South African art writings in particular.

divorced from historical method. As part of this context, I introduce the reader to the authors, institutions and publishers whose interpretations of 'modern black' art I have selected for discussion. Such background information provides a necessary frame for the texts under consideration, and is included, *inter alia*, to support my contention that the various authors' views by and large represent the ideological and intellectual orientation of their respective institutions and disciplines at that particular historical juncture. I also contend that the various authors draw on a stock of cultural codes and conventions appropriate to their particular genre or target audience. It is necessary for the reader to know, therefore, which types of texts they are dealing with; whether they are meant for academic or popular consumption, and who the publishers and target audiences were.

After this brief context, I proceed with a critical analysis of the texts concerned. Rather than dealing with these texts one by one, in chronological fashion, I have conducted this discussion according to items I regard as characteristic of the modernist discursive paradigm. I introduce this critical analysis by unpacking and deconstructing the discursive strategies employed by apartheid-era writers to lend authority and 'scientific' value to their theories. I demonstrate significant shifts in rhetorical practices and terminologies and speculate on reasons for these changes. I show how rhetorical devices aid in the construction of the authorial voice, and I demonstrate how these rhetorical strategies share many of the characteristics of early and mid 20th-century ethnographic writing – a correspondence that, I argue, is not coincidental.

The next part of the deconstruction deals with the ways in which certain rhetorical devices and discursive practices led to the construction of a canon of modern black art. I propose that this canonical understanding of modern black art is a collectivising device that serves to Otherise the phenomenon and thus contain the threat (of cultural sameness) posed by an emerging modern black art.

My next subsection focuses on how apartheid-era discourses employ a trope of Africa to essentialise contemporary black art production as inherently different and Other. This trope, I suggest, can be regarded as a direct continuation of an idea of Africa that developed from the 15th century onwards and thus shares most of the ambivalences of the colonial imaginary.

This is followed by a discussion of the modernist conception of time perpetuated in the writings under consideration. I argue that the evolutionary timescale employed in these texts continue and entrench colonial and early 20th-century anthropological perceptions of progress and

development. The aim of this discussion is to demonstrate how a progressivist and teleological conception of temporality affected not only the critical evaluation and interpretation of 20th-century black art, but also the terminologies it engendered. With this in mind, I show how the prevalent categories for apartheid-era black art production are employed in accordance with an evolutionary time frame, and that this has the effect of denying coevalness, not only temporally, but also spatially.

I next investigate the construction of a modern black subjectivity in the texts concerned. I propose that an implied 'Africa gene' is seen as one major determinant in the production of a modern black identity, and a reductive 'two-worlds paradigm' as another. I also show how these texts attempt to resolve the contradiction between a High Modernist conception of the artist as supreme individual and the essentialist imperative to read all black culture and identity as collective. The processes of urbanisation and modernisation are also theorised as major complicating factors in the attempt to formulate a coherent black identity. I investigate how various conflicting discourses are rationalised and subsumed under an essentialising formulation of identity, and propose that these contradictions flow out of certain paradoxes and aporias that are inherent to Enlightenment subjectivity. In this unpacking of identity, I also look at the status of the modern (male) black subject in national terms, since, as Wright (2004: 126) reminds us, "race and identity are only two parts of the necessary triumvirate for any analysis of race and the modern subject. The construction of the nation is the necessary third component". Finally I focus on how ethnicity impacts on the above conceptions of identity.

I conclude my deconstruction by considering the issue of white mediation. I demonstrate that most of the texts under investigation simultaneously overemphasise *and* underestimate white intervention as factors in both the stylistic execution and subject matter of modern black art. I argue that the relationship between white teacher and black pupil is generally sketched as a parent-child interaction, while the coercive strategies adopted by white institutions and teachers are largely glossed over or ignored.

In my last chapter (Chapter 5), I round off my discussion of apartheid-era discourse around black art production by investigating texts that belong to the 'resistance paradigm' (Nuttal & Michael 2000) of the 1980s and early 1990s. I argue that the events of 1976 and the subsequent polarisation and radicalisation of the cultural arena resulted in a shift in South African academic (and popular) discourse. This discussion mainly revolves around publications produced by academics from traditionally liberal English universities (including my own). I

contend that these writings, while significantly different to earlier writings on modern black art, may nonetheless be regarded as examples of modernist discourse since some of the key discursive characteristic of the modernist episteme – most notably a tendency towards extreme dualism – can be discerned in these writings.

In my conclusion, I briefly situate this thesis within the reigning postmodern intellectual and academic climate in South Africa. In this regard I keep in mind Heller's (1999: 4) statement regarding the relationship between postmodernity and modernity:

Postmodernity is not a stage that comes after modernity, it is not the retrieval of modernity – it is modern. More precisely, the postmodern perspective could perhaps best be described as the self-reflective consciousness of modernity itself.

I finally round off my thesis by briefly proposing ways of overcoming the most pervasive dialectics and canonical assumptions that have underpinned close on a century of writing about modern black art.

CHAPTER 1

TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF DISCOURSE AND THE METHOD OF DECONSTRUCTION

To 'deconstruct' philosophy is ... to work through the structured genealogy of its concepts in the most scrupulous and immanent fashion, but at the same time to determine, from a certain external perspective that it cannot name or describe, what this history may have concealed or excluded, constituting itself as a history through its representation in which it has a stake (Derrida 1981: 15).

This thesis constitutes a critical deconstruction of white South African writing on contemporary black South African culture of the 20th century. As such it participates in what Foucault calls 'a critical ontology of ourselves' that aims, ultimately, at exploring the boundaries and underpinnings of current and historical discourses with the tentative intention of proposing possible ways of going beyond those limits.¹³ This attempt continues a radical tradition of modernity critique that may be seen as the product of a philosophical shift from epistemology to hermeneutics (Rabinow 1986). The hermeneutics' questioning of Enlightenment epistemology departs from the understanding that human beings (and hence the discourses they produce) are historically conditioned, and that understanding and knowing are based on presuppositions that flow from a particular historical world-view. Husserl's concept of a 'lifeworld' (*Lebenswelt*) which conditions or fore-structures our understanding, Heidegger's *vorhabe*, *vorsicht* and *vorgriff*, and Gadamer's notion of '*vorurteil*' or pre-judgement, were all foundational concepts in the development of a postmodern critique of the modernist attempt at trans-historical, universal knowledge (Rabinow 1986). This hermeneutical challenge to the Enlightenment rendered impossible the Cartesian and Kantian quest for a firm, unshakeable foundation for knowledge.

In so far as this thesis traces the genealogy and critically interrogates the status of concepts and the rhetoric of truth claims in modernist discourse, it also partakes of a general postmodern shift from a philosophy of consciousness to a philosophy of language. In order to

¹³ "The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them" (Foucault in Rabinow 1991: 50).

situate this research within the postmodern tradition of subversive reading, I need to briefly consider the linguistic theories that gave rise to the above-mentioned philosophical shift.

1.1 THE LINGUISTIC TURN

While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide an in-depth discussion of structuralist and post-structuralist semiotics, it is nevertheless necessary to provide a brief sketch of the impact of structuralist and more particularly post-structuralist semiotics on philosophy, cultural studies and the social sciences, since my own method of critical deconstruction derives from a post-structuralist apprehension of the primal role of discourse in the construction and production of meaning. The structuralist description of language as a system of differences made up of signs which bear arbitrary and deeply conventional relations to the world to which they refer, and the post-structuralists' consequent development of self-reflective historiographies, revolutionised the social sciences' and humanities' understanding of representation, 'truth' and discourse in general. The emphasis on language – rather than the consciousness of the autonomous rational subject - as source and locus of meaning, provided a major impetus for the critique of modernity's totalising claims to universal knowledge and truth.

The 'linguistic turn' followed in the wake of the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure's reconsideration of the nature of the sign, and may be described as a shift from a paradigm of perception (which assumes that the mind, or consciousness, has direct and immediate access to the world) to a paradigm of language (which assumes that our relationship to the world is mediated) (Degenaar 1989: 3). Semiotics thus became the fulcrum of an academic movement which revolutionised the social sciences' and the humanities' understanding of their epistemological status: "Semiotics as an intellectual enterprise endeavours to reveal and analyse the extent to which meanings are produced out of the structural relations that exist within any sign system, and not from the external reality they seem so naturally to depict" (O'Sullivan 1994: 43).

Saussure described the sign as a 'two-sided psychological entity' that consists of a signifier (sound-image) and a signified (concept). According to Saussure, the relationship between the signifier and signified is fundamentally arbitrary and determined by convention.¹⁴ Due to this

¹⁴ Hawthorne cautions, however, that Saussure's characterisation of the sign as arbitrary has led to the misconstrual that words and things, or signs and referents bear absolutely no relation to one another (thus giving rise to a new formalism in literary and art criticism) (1994: 189). A proper understanding of the Saussurian sign

arbitrary relation, the sign has no intrinsic meaning but derives its significance from a relationship with, and difference to, other signs within a linguistic system (Cilliers 1998: 38). The sign has no essential qualities linking it to that which it represents – it lacks positive content and only acquires meaning in relation to other, related signs. Thus the meaning of the sign 'cold' is determined by its differentiation from all other signs. This system of differences means that any given sign relies on surrounding signs to constitute its own presence.

Despite the arbitrariness and non-essential nature of the relationship between the signifier and the signified, the meaning of words is not subject to change at the whim of the individual user. The stability of language is guaranteed by its systemic structure, which is extra-individual and socially constructed. In this sense, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is reasonably fixed and immutable. Yet language is not rigid, but changes continuously in response to social and historical exigencies. This mutation of language (and by extension meaning) is the complex and inevitable product of time and social change. In this sense, language is a self-modifying but stable system which transcends individual usage. Structuralism thus begins to subvert the Enlightenment notion of the autonomous subject as source of meaning - a process that the post-structuralists were to take to its ultimate conclusion.

The French post-structuralist, Jacques Derrida, accused Saussure of doubling back on the revolutionary potential of his own formulation of the sign by describing the signified as a concept which pre-exists language: "a concept signified in and of itself, a concept simply present for thought, independent of a relationship to language, that is of a relationship to a system of signifiers" (1981: 19). This, Derrida suggests, allows Saussure to fall back onto a 'transcendental signified' and thus to re-assert the metaphysics of presence.¹⁵ Saussure's description of the signified as a concept suggests that the thoughts of the individual user pre-exist language.¹⁶ This, Derrida suggests, falls back onto a modernist/Enlightenment conception of rational, autonomous subjectivity. Derrida mines the revolutionary potential of Saussure's

does not elide extra-linguistic reality, but takes context into consideration as co-determinant of signification, allowing for a positional or relational reading of meaning.

¹⁵ Culler supplies a good definition of presence as "the notion of meaning as a signifying intention present to consciousness at the moment of utterance and thus treating the meaning of a speech act as ultimately determined by or grounded in a consciousness whose intention is fully present to itself" (1998:115).

¹⁶ Saussure's emphasis on spoken language as primary, with written language as its secondary, inferior representation, further prioritises the mental state of the speaker, and hence contributes to the understanding of the signified as metaphysical presence (ie, it falls back into a modernist paradigm of consciousness and perception). Derrida reverses this priority by insisting that writing more aptly represents language's endless deferral of meaning. He thus regards speaking as a form of writing: "If 'writing' signifies inscription and especially the durable institution of a sign (and that is the only irreducible kernel of the concept of writing), writing in general covers the entire field of linguistic signs" (cited in Cilliers 1998: 43).

dyadic concept of the sign and his emphasis on difference, by proposing a model of the sign in which the signified makes way for another signifier. Instead of the signified existing as a concept in the mind of the speaker, Derrida suggests that the signified cannot be pinned down (is never simply present) but collapses into another signifier.

Cilliers suggests that the removal of the sign's mental component (the signified), implies the deconstruction of the subject and of consciousness:

If there is no signified whose content is immediately present to consciousness, but only signifiers whose meaning is unstable and excessive, then the content of consciousness becomes excessive; it cannot be made complete. The subject is no longer in control of meaning that can be made present, but is itself *constituted* by the play of signifiers (1998: 43, original emphasis).

The connection between language and extra-linguistic reality can never be determined, since the language-user's apprehension of extra-linguistic reality is always-already irrevocably mediated by language. Thus the post-structuralists added to the structuralists' partial dismantling of the autonomous modern subject a radical skepticism regarding the ability of language to establish or relay truth about any extra-linguistic reality.

The structuralist understanding that meaning emanates from a fixed, linear set of relationships between signs makes way, in post-structuralism, for contingent, open-ended and playful relationships between signs (Degenaar 1989: 2). Post-structuralism thus opens up possibilities for a consideration of language as an endless chain of signifiers (or a network of differences), rather than as a closed and stable system of representation capable of communicating 'truth'. To describe this play of differences, Derrida coined the term *différance*, which he defined as "the movement by which language, or any code, any system of reference in general, becomes 'historically' constituted as a fabric of differences" (cited in Degenaar 1987: 5). *Différance* serves as the counter of logocentrism and its presupposition of the existence of fixed meanings predicated on extra-linguistic presence or origin (metaphysics of presence). *Différance* incorporates the Saussurian understanding of language as a system of differences, while simultaneously grafting onto it a sense of the endless deferral of meaning, or the provisionality of distinctions in the interminable play between signs.¹⁷ Related to the concept of *différance*, is

¹⁷ Cilliers points out that *différance* does not only contain traces of the term 'defer' in the temporal meaning of the word, but also of 'defer' in the sense of 'submitting to': "Each trace [sign] is not only delayed, but also subjugated by every other trace" (1998: 45). Jonathan Culler adds that the term *différance* also alludes to the difference between *langue* and *parole*, *langue* being a linguistic system, and *parole* referring to individual speech acts. The

the Derridean concept of the trace. Since the sign only acquires meaning by virtue of its difference to other signs, it can be said to be constituted of the traces of other, related signs: "The sign has no component that belongs to itself only; it is merely a collection of the traces of every sign running through it" (Cilliers 1998: 44). The intimate linkage between signs means that each sign is constituted with reference to the trace in it of other signs sequentially or systematically related to it. For Derrida, "this linkage, this weaving, is the text, which is produced only through the transformation of another text. Nothing, either in the elements or in the system, is anywhere simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces" (in Cilliers 1998: 44).

Derrida's formulation of a post-structuralist semiotics thus affirms the role of language (discourse) in the invention of (provisional) meanings and knowledges, while simultaneously undermining the potential of language to make truth claims or to fix meanings conclusively. In post-structuralism all knowledges, whether scientific, social, political or historical, are regarded as textual constructs, and as such are susceptible to *différance* and the incessant ambivalent play of language.

Post-structuralism thus disables the Enlightenment quest to describe or represent the world in rational, empirical and objective terms (or what Degenaar calls "a fixed a-historical point of view" (1989: 218)). Reason itself is seen as a textual convention and a historical form (as parochial and context-bound as pagan beliefs in a pantheon of gods). The totalising discourses of modernity, with their claims to universal and timeless truth based on objective scientific methods of systematic research, can thus be subjected to a process of deconstruction in order to expose the ambivalent play of differences that underlie (and undermine) their assertion of a simply present, absolute knowledge. The implication that it is not humans who speak language, but language that speaks humans, has deflected attention from the meaning-producing individual, to the social and political space of discourse as the source and locus of meaning.

1.2 DEFINING DISCOURSE

The writing of Foucault has been highly influential in the understanding and application of the term 'discourse'. Foucault regards discourses as 'large groups of statements' that constitute terrains of language governed by rules particular to that terrain (1972: 37). Foucault

term *différance* therefore refers to the alteration between structure and event, which affirms writing (or speech as archiwriting) as the systematic play of differences, or traces of differences (1998: 103 -104).

describes the relationship of the text to discourse as one in which different texts (legal, philosophical, cultural etc) are combined in discursive formation. Despite inter-disciplinary differences, these texts refer to the same object, share the same style, employ similar strategies and incorporate similar political patterns (Hall & Gieben 1992: 291). Hall reminds us that: "Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. ... Since all social practices entail meaning, all practices have a discursive aspect" (in Hall & Gieben 1992: 291).

Foucault stressed the intimate imbrication of discourse (particularly discourses of knowledge) with the establishment and exercise of power. He urges that:

[W]e should admit that power produced knowledge. ... That power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute ... power relations (1980: 31).

The postcolonial critic and author of *Orientalism* Said endorses Foucault's understanding of discourse as the prime vehicle of power. He adds that texts do not only aid in producing the knowledges that grant and entrench power-relations, but that they are in fact co-productive of socio-political realities: "Most important, such texts can create not only knowledge, but also the very reality they appear to describe" (1978: 94). Errington confirms that "Discourses materialize and narrativize categories by creating institutions and using media that illustrate, support, confirm, and naturalize their dominant ideas" (1998: 4). The knowledges produced by and in discourse exercise power over those who are 'known'. Discourses (and particularly modernist discourse, as I will demonstrate later), describe those that are 'known' as subjects, and thus objectify them in order to make them susceptible to instrumental purposes.

Clearly these theories suggest a close relationship between discourse and ideology. Hall (in Hall & Gieben 1992: 291) points out that, in so far as discourse may be described as a set of beliefs which produces knowledges that serve the interests of the powerful, it bears a very close resemblance to ideology. Foucault, however, prefers the term discourse because it avoids the implications of 'truth' or 'falsehood' that attach to the Marxist definition of ideology. Foucault's notion of discourse raises many epistemological issues since it undermines any easy distinction between truth and falsehood. According to Foucault, discourses aid in constructing 'regimes of truth' within societies. These 'regimes of truth' not only determine which discourses are accepted as true, but also supply the mechanisms which

enable subjects to distinguish 'truth' from 'falsehood', provide the means to sanction 'truth', and ascribe the status of those who are deemed purveyors of 'truth' (1980). Foucault's formulation of discourse does not allow the notion of 'innocent' discourses, since all discourses serve as systems through which power circulates. He thus conceives of discourse as "a violence that we do to things, or, at all events, as a practice we impose upon them" (quoted in Reiss 1982: 28).

Foucault developed the notion of an *'épistémè'* to indicate the totality of relations that unite various discursive practices at a particular historical juncture. The notion of the *épistémè* describes discursive periods (as opposed to historical epochs or eras), and is defined by James Boon as follows: "An episteme, which is something like a paradigm or even a grammar and is unquestioned from within its assumptions, comprises the 'conditions of possibility' of interrelating knowledges under distinct historical circumstances" (1982:32). According to Hawthorn an episteme does not simply refer to the ruling ideas of an age, but must be regarded as so totally appropriative of discursive space that it leaves no room for alternative ways of producing and transmitting knowledge (1994: 61). Modernist discourse may be regarded as such an episteme.

The fact that modernist discourse constitutes an episteme does not mean that it underwent no changes. Hall (in Hall & Gieben 1992: 314) points out that discourses do not end abruptly, but that they go on unfolding and changing shape to accommodate changing circumstances. Although change occurs, seemingly 'new' approaches often carry many of the unconscious premises and unexamined assumptions of previous discourses in their blood-stream. It is this persistence of key assumptions that enables me to find traces of Enlightenment concepts in late 20th-century South African art writing, and to consider these writings as belonging to an enduring modernist episteme.

1.3 DECONSTRUCTION: AIMS AND METHODS

In *a Theory of Semiotics* Eco defines a sign as "everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else. Semiotics is in principle the discipline of studying everything which can be used in order to lie" (1976: 7). As an offshoot of semiotics, deconstruction may be described as a strategy aimed at undoing the rhetorical operation of 'truth statements'. Culler insists, however, that it should be made very clear that "deconstruction has no better

theory of truth. It is a practice of reading and writing attuned to the aporias that arise in attempts to tell us the truth" (1998: 99).

Culler describes the method of deconstruction as "a critical undoing of the hierarchical oppositions on which theories depend" (1998: 131). The method of deconstruction is derived from the tendency of language (particularly well developed in modernist discourses) to use binary oppositions to define concepts and to enable the differences that language requires to be efficacious. Hall explains that a sharp polarisation between concepts is needed to empower language to communicate, but that these polarisations deny the inevitable blurring of boundaries between apparently mutually exclusive oppositions (in Hall & Gieben 1992: 277).¹⁸ The process of deconstruction issues from an understanding that binary oppositions, while pretending a symmetry between a pair of opposing constructs, are in fact unequally weighted. Derrida insists that: "In a traditional philosophical opposition we have not a peaceful coexistence of facing terms but a violent hierarchy. One of the terms dominates the other ... [and] occupies the commanding position". He continues by describing the aims of deconstruction as follows: "To deconstruct the opposition is above all, at a particular moment, to reverse the hierarchy" (1981: 56-57). Post-structuralist critics reveal the logocentric, phallogocentric and Eurocentric bias of modernist discourse by compelling the reader to confront the violent hierarchies implicit in oppositions such as man/woman, rational/emotional, civilised/primitive, et cetera.

Deconstruction reveals the rhetorical strategies employed in attempts to determine essence, foundations, centres and grounds, by uncovering and destabilising classical rhetorical oppositions such as literal/metaphorical, serious/nonserious, universal/particular, conscious/unconscious. Deconstructionists point out that in these unequally weighted binaries the superior term belongs to the higher presence of the logos, while the inferior term marks a fall, a complication, or a negation of the superior term. Thus all metaphysics of presence is grounded on radical exclusion or the suppression of alterity. Because the authority and presence of the centre depends on the dismissal or negation of its opposite as insignificant or inferior, the deconstructionist often chooses to concentrate on the apparently marginal or contingent features of a text, such as the author's choice of metaphors, or the preferred use of

¹⁸ Hall uses the example of night and day to demonstrate that binary oppositions are linguistic constructs that deny the extent to which oppositions meet and blur: where does night stop and day start (in Hall & Gieben 1992: 277)?

certain terminologies over others, and seemingly incidental rhetorical features such as forms of address. The identification of rhetorical operations is very important in deconstruction.

Culler (1998: 140) points out that all interpretation relies on distinctions between the central and the marginal, the essential and the inessential. Interpretation usually aims to discover what is central to a text or group of texts. Deconstruction reverses this interpretative order by prioritising 'non-essential' elements of the text. Instead of focusing, as in most hermeneutics, on the text's unifying narrative scheme or argument, deconstruction targets rhetoric, tropes and metaphors with the ultimate aim of undoing the rhetorical operation responsible for the hierarchisation of concepts. These 'supplementary' and 'marginal' textual features put the logic of supplementarity to work as interpretive strategy: "[W]hat has been relegated to the margins or set aside by previous interpreters may be important precisely for those reasons that led it to be set aside" (Culler 1998: 140).

Culler cautions, however, that this reversal must not be seen as the establishment of a new centre, but rather as the deliberate and systematic subversion or unsettling of logocentric distinctions. Deconstruction concentrates on 'surface features' of the text as clues to the underlying logic of that which is important but not outspoken. These revealing but contingent elements of the text cause the text to 'deconstruct itself' and to expose its own 'paradoxical logic' (1998: 140). Texts self-deconstruct in that "the logic of the argument used to defend a position contradicts the position affirmed" (Culler 1998: 155). In this way, deconstruction works in and around a given discursive framework rather than claiming to construct new ground. This subversion of the text on its own grounds constitutes, according to Sim, the political agenda of deconstruction. For Sim, deconstruction is inherently political

...not only because of the ways in which a deconstructive reading can turn a text's logic against itself by showing how the logic of its language can differ from and play against the author's stated claims, but also because deconstructors tend to seize on the inconsistencies, inequalities or hierarchies which are expounded or glossed over either by a text, by a whole discourse, or even by an entire system of beliefs (1999: 222).

A deconstructive reading of a text aims at exposing the normative assumptions of the discourse it forms part of. As Foucault repeatedly stressed, norms are produced by the radical exclusion of the views of those who do not count as ideal subjects (in the terms of logocentric, modernist discourse, all subjects that are not sane, rational, Western men). There can be no question, in a

deconstructive reading, of accepting consensus as truth, since general agreement is produced by means of such radical exclusion. For this reason, Culler says, deconstruction attempts to view systems from the outside as well as the inside, and "tries to keep alive the possibility that the eccentricity of women, blacks, poets, prophets, and madmen might yield truths about the system to which they are marginal" (1998: 154). For Degenaar, deconstruction presents an opportunity to

overturn hierarchies, to expose power-relations, to unmask prejudices based on the privileging of race, class, sex, culture and ethnicity, to emphasise issues that have been marginalised, to challenge canonisation and to become the voice of the silent cause of history (1989: 14).

It must be made clear that deconstruction does not wish to destroy that which it deconstructs. The textual inconsistencies, illogicalities and paradoxes that are unearthed by deconstruction must not be discarded as illegitimate practices or regarded as discursive mistakes that need to be replaced by 'better' logic, but must rather promote the continued interrogation of all metaphysical grounds that are employed to provide presence or privilege. Thus all claims to have discovered a foundation or epistemologically authoritative position must be put in question by deconstructive practice. Nor should deconstruction be seen as the final and definitive overturning of hierarchies. Since the binary nature of language inevitable leads to the establishment of hierarchies, no deconstructive attempt can provide a permanent, non-hierarchical solution to textual power-abuses.

Derrida pointed out that to deconstruct a philosophical text

is ... to work through the structured genealogy of its concepts in the most scrupulous and immanent fashion, but at the same time to determine, from a certain external perspective that it cannot name or describe, what this history may have concealed or excluded, constituting itself as a history through its representation in which it has a stake (in Culler 1998: 86).

This statement does not only reveal the deconstructionist's interest in the occluded or excluded aspects of a text, but also emphasises the importance of establishing the genealogy of concepts as well as stressing the indeterminate, ambiguous and unfixed (ie: non-transcendental) position from which the deconstruction necessarily takes place.

It stands to reason that no 'structured genealogy' of concepts can be undertaken purely from *within* a given text. History and context are clearly indispensable in the tracing of such genealogies.¹⁹ Culler points out that critics who accuse deconstruction of ahistoricism disregard Derrida's emphasis on the historical formation not only of discourse, but of meaning and reading in general. For Derrida, historical contextualisation is intrinsic to a scrupulous deconstruction. But, as Culler points out, Derrida stresses both the historicity of utterances, and the impossibility of turning this historicity into a ground or foundation for the text (1998: 128-129).

Culler describes Derrida's cautious, two-pronged approach to history as follows: "Deconstruction couples a philosophical critique of history and historical understanding with the specification that discourse is historical and meaning historically determined, both in principle and in practice" (1998: 129). Derrida distrusts the narrative ordering and sequencing that characterises the 'historical approach' in which History is invoked as ultimate reality and source of truth, but he continually asserts the historicity of discourses and emphasises the specificity of their particular contexts in order to undermine their transcendentalism.

But while Derrida talks of the need to consider contextual/historical frame as partly determining the force of language, he stresses the impossibility of exhaustively specifying contextual determinants. Culler expresses the uncontainable and unmasterable nature of context as follows: "Meaning is context bound, but context is boundless", or, in Derrida's words: "No meaning can be determined out of context, but no context permits saturation" (Culler 1998: 122-123). Thus any given context is always open to further description, and it is virtually impossible to determine with any certainty which contextual factors are more important and which less so: context emerges as itself a text (or a multitude of intertextualities) which has to be interpreted, and in which marginal or supplementary aspects may again point towards excluded or suppressed alterities.

There are also elements of context that defy description or inquiry, such as, for instance, the unconscious desires of the author.²⁰ The inexhaustibility of contextual factors thus contributes to

¹⁹ Bourdieu similarly stressed that a narrow focus on representations alone cannot unsettle or dismantle doxa. One must also consider the social conditions that assisted in the production of dominant representations (Stabile & Morooka 2003: 335).

²⁰ These unconscious desires, post-structuralists suggest, may be more important than virtually any other contextual factors. For that reason, Freud is important to deconstruction because his theory of the unconscious was one of first attacks to be launched against Western logocentrism. Freud 'deconstructed' the unconscious as the suppressed other of reason and reversed the hierarchical relationship between the two. The same can be said of Nietzsche, who

the impossibility of controlling the effects of signification. But, as Degenaar points out: "The fact that an interpretation is not final but remains relative to a vocabulary which could be otherwise, does not invalidate the contribution of that interpretation to our understanding of the world" (1989: 220). So, for Culler

the combination of context-bound meaning and boundless context on the one hand makes possible proclamations of the indeterminacy of meaning, ... but on the other hand urges that we continue to interpret texts, classify speech acts, and attempt to elucidate the conditions of signification (1998: 133).

It would thus be a mistake to see deconstruction as the nihilistic abandonment of all distinctions, or as indeterminacy so radical that meaning is construed as the sole, impetuous invention of the reader (as those who charge deconstruction with extreme relativism would suggest). Rather deconstruction approaches the text as the site of a complex play between numerous contextual and other textual factors. Derrida uses grafting as a model for thinking about this intertextual logic of texts. Deconstruction is partly interested in uncovering or identifying grafts in a text, and in particular to pick up how the splicing and grafting of heterogeneous arguments and concepts elaborate, change or displace previous senses and meanings.²¹

The imperative to consider context flows from the fact that deconstruction is not simply a new hermeneutical method,²² but rather a way of taking stock of the political and institutional structures that make possible and govern discursive practices. Thus "deconstruction is never concerned only with signified content but especially with the conditions and assumptions of discourse" (Culler 1998: 156). Foucault repeatedly emphasised that, in order to account for the positions and viewpoints from which people speak, the critic must also consider "the institutions which prompt people to speak ... and which store and distribute the things that are said" (cited in Macdonnel 1986: 2). For this reason, an effective deconstruction must take account of the political and social institutions within which discourses are produced. The text that is in the process of deconstruction is thus situated in a broader intertextual fabric of institutional discourses.

also inverted binaries such as real/imaginary, dream/experience, life/death, normal/pathological, etc (Culler 1998: 160-162).

²¹ Derrida proposes that the grafts that 'take' in the text, are ones that succeed, bear fruit and disseminate. He uses the metaphor of grafting to account for the ability of language to function in new contexts with new force (in Culler 136-137).

²² Degenaar says that deconstruction is not a hermeneutical method, since hermeneutics is based on the paradigm of perception, while deconstruction is based on the paradigm of language (1989: 217). As pointed out earlier, however, the 'linguistic turn' can be seen as a by-product of a general shift from a modernist epistemology to a postmodern hermeneutics.

1.4 DECONSTRUCTION AS SELF-REFLECTION

According to De Man (quoted in Culler 1998: 251):

The innumerable writings that dominate our lives are made intelligible by a preordained agreement as to their referential authority; this agreement however is merely contractual, never constitutive. It can be broken at all times and every piece of writing can be questioned as to its rhetorical mode.

It is the aim of the deconstructionist, he continues, to reveal the text's "dependence on a referential agreement that uncritically took their truth or falsehood for granted". The conundrum of deconstructive writing, is that, like the text it deconstructs, it too takes place within the bounds of a referential agreement, and it too employs rhetorical strategies to convince and persuade, and is thus similarly vulnerable to questioning.

Thus the deconstructor attempts a self-reflective kind of writing that, in as far as it is possible, tries to take note of his/her own presuppositions. This, Degenaar insists, does not mean that the self can position himself/herself outside the text and evaluate himself/herself from an 'objective' vantage point (1998: 217). Rather, the writer takes into account the fact that he/she speaks from a present historical position, thus contributing towards the understanding that interpretation is a dynamic, intersubjective process and never a search for universality or objectivity. It stands to reason that no deconstruction must be undertaken as an attempt at a final history, and that no writing can escape the necessity that its own achievements may (and probably will) have to be rewritten.

Degenaar cautions, however, that it would be a misunderstanding to regard the deconstructor's attempt at positionality as a declaration of individualism and subjectivity. As a member of an interpretative community, the subject moves outside himself/herself in the very act of communication, since writing "entails participation in the intersubjectivity of the language game he is involved in" (1989: 218). Thus writing constitutes a site of signification beyond both subjectivism and objectivism.

This very brief summation of the methods and goals of deconstruction situates my own practice within the intellectual context of 20th-century modernity critique, and explicates the broad methodological framework I adopt in my deconstruction of South African art writings.

CHAPTER 2

TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF MODERNIST DISCOURSE

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that all political and social theories and philosophies conceived in modernity are also theories and philosophies of modernity (Heller 1999: vii).

Since this thesis departs from the premise that apartheid-era South African writings about 'modern black' art typically belong to the modernist episteme, and that particular colonial concepts of African culture and subjectivity thus persist in these writings, I need to take stock of modernity as discursive framework. Ultimately this thesis intends to demonstrate that South African writing about modern black art belongs to the modernist episteme, and I therefore pay much closer attention to modernism as ethnocentric discourse, than to, say, its phallogocentric aspects, although the two are intimately related. This discussion of modernity as discursive paradigm will therefore predominantly highlight elements that determined the epistemological and hermeneutic models that were developed to deal with racial and cultural difference in modernist texts. For this reason I give precedence to central dimensions of modernist discourse that demonstrably impact on ideas about race and culture.

2.1 A BRIEF DEFINITION OF MODERNITY

The term 'modernity' is used to describe both a historical era and the character of that era. The term thus encompasses the socio-economic and political structures of modern societies, as well as the dominant ideological and philosophical ideals that shaped them. The received historical account of modernity, which was standard in textbooks until the 1950s and is still common in encyclopaedic sources today, suggests that modernity began in the 17th century. These accounts of modernity, which tend to be optimistic and somewhat self-congratulatory about the modern enterprise, are summarised by Toulmin in *Cosmopolis* (1990: 13):

... [they propose that] the modern age began in the 17th century, and that the transition from medieval to modern modes of thought and practice rested on the adoption of rational methods in all serious fields of intellectual inquiry – by Galileo Galilei in physics, by René Descartes in epistemology – with their example soon being followed in political theory by Thomas Hobbes.

This orthodox account or received view presents modernity unquestionably as ‘a Good Thing’ – an intellectual revolution that, through its insistence on the power of rationality, broke with the superstition and tradition of the medieval world to bring about striking innovations in the sciences and a radically new and critical method in philosophy. Philosophy, influenced by the new, empirical and systematic sciences of nature, was finally liberated from the confines of theology and became a field of ‘pure’ inquiry into matters of universal and timeless importance. On a political level, the growth of a new, mercantile class, free from the stifling authority of the church, heralded the birth of the modern Nation State. Humanism replaced the vertical hierarchies of feudalism and theocracy with the horizontal fraternity of increasingly more democratic political practices.

Later more encompassing and critical socio-historical views of modernity regard it as having unfolded in phases since the Renaissance (see, for instance, Berman’s *All that is Solid Melts into Air* of 1991). According to such readings, the Renaissance constitutes the early phase of modernity; the 17th century lays the foundations of modern science and philosophy; the 18th and 19th centuries are interpreted as the industrial phase; and the 20th century as the late-modern period. Such a ‘phased’ reading of early, middle and late modernity, while useful and not inaccurate as such, runs the risk of suggesting a teleological Grand Unfolding of a single modernity, with biological implications of infancy, maturity and decay. The evolutionary model of historical development stresses continuities at the expense of breaks, ruptures and reversals; and presents a single historical process which conceives of a homogeneous modernity unfolding in accordance with some inner necessity towards a preordained conclusion. This promotes a conception of history as progress rather than discontinuous process, which perpetuates, rather than questions, a modernist myth.²³

Hall and Gieben (1992: 8) offer an elegant solution by suggesting different periodisations for different processes. Thus a philosophical account of modernity would offer a different time and trajectory of modernity than, say, a sociological account. This suggests the existence of plural modernities and many co-existing histories.²⁴ In *Cosmopolis* (1990), Toulmin not only endorses this notion of different starting points for different aspects of modernity, but suggests that

²³ The postcolonial critic Said observes that such historicism perpetuates the universalising and self-validating that is endemic to modernist discourse: “... historicism meant that one human history uniting humanity either culminated in or was observed from the vantage point of Europe, or the West” (in Young 1990: 10).

²⁴ Derrida credited Althusser with producing a similar solution to historicism: “Althusser’s entire, and necessary, critique of the ‘Hegelian’ concept of history and the notion of an expressive totality, etc., aims at showing that there is not one single history, a general history, but rather histories different in their type, rhythm, mode of inscription – intervallic, differentiated histories. I have always subscribed to this” (in Young 1990: 7).

modernity, instead of undergoing a continuous, progressive unfolding from its earliest conception to its late-modern manifestation, underwent reactionary reverse-flows that interrupted or countered some key humanist conceptions underlying its early development. Toulmin thus suggests two starting points for modernity: the Renaissance for the origination of a modern Humanities rooted in a humanism inspired largely by classical literatures, and the 17th century for the development of a scientific modernity rooted in a universalising theory of natural philosophy. He reverses the orthodox, developmental vision of modernity by suggesting that the modernity of the 17th century, regarded by the orthodox as the true origin of the modern age, represented a kind of reactionary counter-movement to the open-minded, skeptical and tolerant humanism of Renaissance philosophers such as Montaigne, Rabelais, Erasmus and Shakespeare.²⁵

Like Toulmin, most postcolonial critics of modernity emphasise the importance of the Renaissance in the origins of modern thought, since the voyages of discovery and contact with 'Other' cultures played a pivotal role in the creation of a modern Western self-consciousness and self-definition (Dussel 1996; Young 1990; Hall & Gieben 1992). Hall quotes John Roberts on the symbolic significance of journeys of exploration:

The conquest of the high seas was the first and greatest of all triumphs over natural forces which were to lead to domination by Western civilization of the whole globe. Knowledge is power, and the knowledge won by the first systematic explorers ... had opened the way to the age of Western world hegemony (in Hall and Gieben 1992: 285).

²⁵ Toulmin links the Enlightenment's reactionary reformulation of the flexible humanism of the Renaissance to Europe's economic depression and political instability during the 17th century (1990: 16). He proposes that, instead of the classical conception of modernity as a gradual, systematic and progressive emancipation from superstition and theocratic thinking to enlightened rationalism, the 17th century saw the intensification of theological pressure (from both Catholic and Protestant authorities) on intellectuals to teach and disseminate dogma. There was thus "a narrowing in the focus of preoccupations, and a closing in of intellectual horizons" (Toulmin 1990: 19). This shift, according to Toulmin, corresponded with a shift from Aristotelian thought during the Renaissance (which proposed different 'rationalities' for different contexts and contingencies), to a Platonic proposition of a single, formalised, universally applicable Reason in the Enlightenment. Whereas the Renaissance humanists were concerned with concrete, local and contingent questions that tolerated (and even celebrated) the plurality, ambiguity, imperfection and uncertainty of the human condition; 17th-century rationalism represented a movement from the particular to the universal, the timely to the timeless, and the local to the general. Whereas the humanists of the 16th century found inspiration in the particularities and contingencies of history, ethnography and geography; the 17th-century rationalists "shifted to a higher, stratospheric plane, on which nature and ethics conform to abstract, timeless, general and universal theories" (Toulmin 1990: 35). Whereas particular case-histories (casuistry) provided contexts for and informed ethical issues in the Renaissance, the 17th century saw the development of ethics as an abstract and universal theoretical field.

This passage highlights the most central dynamics of modernisation: the conquest and taming of the natural world, the global domination of Western civilisation, and the gradual systematisation and universalisation of knowledge.

For the purposes of this thesis, therefore, modernity 'began' with the Renaissance voyages of exploration (where it was formulated in a dialectical process of interaction between 'the West and the rest'), emerged as a distinct discursive paradigm during the Enlightenment, and reached a peak during the colonial excesses of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.²⁶ The current academic corpus of modernity critique is predominantly aimed at the totalising discursive trend that emerged during the Enlightenment and which set the tone for the arrogant extremes of the modernist/colonialist paradigm during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The French sociologist Lyotard identified one of the prime characteristics of this consolidated phase of modernist discourse as a tendency towards self-legitimation through the mobilisation of grand narratives:

I will use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse ... making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth (1984: xxiii).

Descartes (in the humanities) and Newton (in the sciences) were particularly instrumental in the formulation of some of modernity's most enduring grand narratives, such as the liberation of humankind through rational inquiry and science as domain of truth.

As regards the 'ending' of modernity, I endorse the view of most critics of modernity that 'postmodernism' should not be understood as the closure or 'overcoming' of modernity, but as its global late-modern manifestation. For Bauman:

Modernity is still with us. It lives as the pressure of unfulfilled hopes and interests ossified in self-reproducing institutions; as the zeal of perforce belated imitators, wishing to join the feast that those who are now leaving it with distaste once proudly enjoyed; as the shape of the world modern labours have left behind for us to inhabit ... (1992: 271).

²⁶ I also propose that Apartheid South Africa perpetuated (and came to epitomise) the worst excesses of modernity at precisely the watershed moment when the rest of the globe, in the aftermath of the totalitarian horrors of the Second World War, embarked on a radical reconsideration of the impossible and dangerous ideals of the Enlightenment project.

Bauman cautions that any dating of modernity runs the risk of representing it as one of many 'quasi-totalities' sectioned off from 'the continuous flow of being' (1991:3).²⁷ Despite some evident continuities with pre-modern discourses, however, it cannot be doubted that modernist discourse constitutes a significant, if not unprecedented, break from previous paradigms. Foucault uses the term 'epistemic rupture' to describe the extent to which modernist discourse constitutes a radical departure from previous (pre-modern) discursive models.

It is patently impossible to provide an account of the geographical, social, economic and political impact of modernity in this thesis. It is sufficient to keep in mind that the enormity of the changes wrought by modernity on the man-made and natural environment; the radical restructuring of the socio-political sphere; and the impact of new economic systems were so encompassing that they effectively transformed the life-world and drastically reshaped the global environment.²⁸

Foucault presents modernity not so much as an epoch, preceded by a primitive pre-modern condition and succeeded by an enigmatic post-modern world, but as an attitude or ethos. In keeping with 19th-century poet and Modernist, Baudelaire, he regards modernity as a kind of consciousness of the discontinuity of time, a self-conscious sense of being in a vertiginous and constantly transforming state of change. Foucault proposes that what has kept modernity flowing and intact since the Enlightenment and despite significant epistemic breaks and discontinuities, is the constant reactivation of this attitude (Rabinow 1991: 40). This idea of modernity, as an epoch of constant, dynamic (and often destructive) change and a relentless dizzy movement forward, compelled Marx to pronounce his by now famous epigram about modernity: 'all that is solid melts into air'.

²⁷ Therefore any consideration of the temporal development of modernity should acknowledge continuities with pre-modern Europe and with the 'post-modern' present. Nietzsche and Heidegger, among others, questioned the radical newness and autochthonous nature of modernity and saw it as connected with ancient scholastic traditions (Pippin 1991: 25).

²⁸ For a condensed but remarkably thorough summation of the phenomenology of modernity, I rely on Berman (1983: 16): "The maelstrom of modern life has been fed from many sources: great discoveries in the physical sciences, changing our images of the universe and our place in it; the industrialization of production, which transforms scientific knowledge into technology, creates new human environments and destroys old ones, speeds up the whole tempo of life, generates new forms of corporate power and class struggle; immense demographic upheavals, severing millions of people from their ancestral habits, hurtling them half-way across the world into new lives; rapid and often cataclysmic urban growth; systems of mass communication, dynamic in their development, enveloping and binding together the most diverse people and societies; increasingly powerful nation-states, bureaucratically structured and operated, constantly striving to expand their powers; mass social movements of people, and peoples, challenging their political and economic rulers, striving to gain some control over their lives; finally, bearing and driving all these people and institutions along, an ever-expanding, drastically fluctuating capitalist world market."

2.2 MODERNIST DISCOURSE

There are many modernist discourses: scientific, legal, political, economic, cultural, philosophical (to name but a few), and this thesis can not hope to cover them all. Although many diverse and sometimes contradictory modernist discourses exist, modernity may be described as a discursive paradigm because all these discourses can be said to partake of the same fundamental episteme.

Reiss proposes that modernism as a dominant discursive class rose to prominence in the 17th century. He defines this discourse as 'analytico-referential' to describe its positivist, experimentalist and utilitarian nature (Reiss 1982: 11).²⁹ Reiss regards the analytico-referential as a 'single discursive order' that can be discerned in all the discursive practices of the age. According to Reiss, analytico-referential discourse replaced a 'discourse of patterning' that was dominant in the Middle Ages (1982: 354). Whereas the medieval 'discourse of patterning' sought to situate its object of knowledge in a divine totality of which man was but a part, analytico-referential discourse employed analysis and representation to gain power over and manipulate objects of knowledge. Reiss uses the telescope as a metaphor of the instrumentalist nature of analytico-referential discourse: the telescope distances the viewer from the world, thus creating a duality between the 'knower' as subject, and the world as object. The world is represented as a passive, inert object of knowledge, and science as the only 'true' instrument of knowing.

Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), which is commonly regarded as the *locus classicus* of modern philosophy and science, sought to establish the unshakeable basis upon which human knowledge and certainty could be grounded and may thus be regarded as the foundation of analytico-referential discourse. This programmatic attempt to establish solid foundations for knowledge was carried forward by Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), which assigned reason the exclusive task of explicating natural science. Thus science was privileged as the only incontrovertible form of knowledge – all other knowledges necessarily had to be tainted by uncertainty, and had to be regarded with suspicion since they were quite probably *doxa* (opinion) rather than *episteme* (knowledge). Thus the Cartesian tradition, on which the Enlightenment rests, can be summarised as a quest for absolute, trans-historical,

²⁹ Different authors use different nomenclatures to describe the rationalist and instrumentalist nature of this discourse. For example, Bauman (1991) talks of legislative reason, Derrida of Logocentrism (1978), and Lemaire of Promethean rationality (1976).

universal foundations for knowledge, and as making a clear distinction between true, scientific knowledge and subjective interpretation (hermeneutics).³⁰

The scientific revolution (of which most groundbreaking discoveries occurred in the 17th century) entrenched the importance of *observation* and *evidence* in the modernist attempt to universalise and systematise knowledge. Descartes was pivotal in the determination of a modernist episteme because he formulated the primacy of the subject and the preeminence of representation: “He associated the scientific aim of predicting and explaining the world with the philosophical aim of picturing and representing the world” (West 2002: 94). Descartes thus provided a theoretical basis for the legitimacy of modern science – a view which held that research yields a ‘true copy’ of reality.³¹ The quintessentially modernist outlook proposes a knowable universe with stable laws that can be apprehended by the senses and codified into a universal system of knowledge by the subject’s rational consciousness. This objective knowledge can then be represented by means of a reliable, stable, neutral and value-free language which bears an uncomplicated and direct relationship to the ‘real’ world.³² The notion of an absolute and verifiable truth is accompanied, necessarily, by the assumption of the universality of that ‘truth’. Thus “the knowledge arrived at through the examination of representations about ‘reality’ and ‘the knowing subject’ would be universal. The universal knowledge is, of course, science” (Rorty in Rabinow 1986: 34). Of primary significance in the development of modernity as discursive paradigm, is the aim of philosophers of the 17th and 18th century, such as Descartes and Kant, “to frame all their questions in terms that rendered

³⁰ It has often been suggested that the quest for absolute knowledge is motivated by existential insecurity generated by the loss of theological certainty. The modern invention of subjectivity depends on the rejection of the pre-modern ‘naturalistic’ view that there is an essential, internal world-order that determines social organisation and structure. But the modern consciousness that there are no intelligible essences or divinely ordained order creates both freedom and anxiety. It yields a vision of the world as potentially open to transformation, but also raises the spectre of extreme relativity and fuels fears “that the world may be governed by no authoritative perspective or controlling point of view” (Cascardi 1992: 4). According to Cascardi, modernity does not constitute a cohesive totality, but rather a “detotalised” whole “whose various facets could only be held together at the level of a historically abstract and substantively empty subject” (1992: 35). Cascardi thus proposes that the emergence of subjectivity “must be understood as a self-legitimizing attempt to ‘ground’ the values of a new age ...” (1992: 63). Rorty similarly links the emergence of epistemology in 17th-century Europe to this existential anxiety: “The desire for a theory of knowledge is a desire for constraint – a desire to find ‘foundations’ to which one might cling, frameworks beyond which one must not stray, objects which impose themselves, representations which cannot be gainsaid” (in Rabinow 1986: 34).

³¹ In his *Encyclopaedia*, D’Alembert recognised that Bacon’s empiricism and Descartes’ mathematical/rationalist outlook combined to introduce “the spirit of experimental science” (in West 2002:96).

³² For this reason, Rorty suggests that it is not coincidence that epistemology arose in 17th-century Europe: “The desire for a theory of knowledge is a desire for constraint – a desire to find ‘foundations’ to which one might cling, frameworks beyond which one must not stray, objects which impose themselves, representations which cannot be gainsaid” (in Rabinow 1986: 34).

them independent of context ..." – in other words, to lay claim to universal, timeless reason (Toulmin 1990: 21).

Rorty speaks of the ambitious and hubristic goals of the Enlightenment project as its '*foci imaginarii*'. He includes in this modernist itinerary, the notions of absolute truth, pure art, a universal humanity, progress, order and certainty (in Bauman 1992: 9). In his definitive postmodern critique of modernity Lyotard suggests that the above characteristic pursuit of universalism, truth and the teleological assumption of human emancipation constitute major modernist metanarratives which justify and legitimate exploitative economic and social practices (1984: 36). Derrida typifies these '*foci imaginarii*' as quintessentially logocentric and as perpetuating a metaphysics of presence. The metaphysical or transcendental presence suggested by logocentrism is valorised in certain key, pervasive concepts, listed by Culler (1998: 94) as: the idea of origin in historical development; spontaneous or unmediated intuition; the transumption of thesis and antithesis in synthesis; truth as what subsists behind experiences; and teleology, or the presence of a goal in unfolding events. We will see all these concepts surface repeatedly in the texts deconstructed in Chapter 4.

Bauman suggests that it is the ultimate aim of logocentric modernist discourse to produce a *compleat mappa mundi* in which all knowledges, tried and tested according to the 'scientific' methods of experimentation and empirical observation, could contribute towards the final naming, classifying and ordering of all things (1991: 8). This compulsion to fill the blank spaces in the *compleat mappa mundi* is motivated by an anxious *horror vacui* and generates a natural intolerance for anything that cannot be assimilated. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, this totalising world picture relies on the creation of taxonomies and classification: "The self which learned about order and subordination through the subjugation of the world soon equated truth in general with classifying thought, without whose fixed distinctions it cannot exist" (1972: 10). Heidegger wrote about the key role of 'expository representation' in the 'objectification of the existent': "This objectification of the existent takes place in re-presentation which aims at presenting whatever exists to itself in such a way that the calculating person can be secure, that is, certain of the existent" (in West 2002: 95).

According to Reiss "various devices are elaborated [in analytico-referential discourse] enabling a claim for the adequacy of concepts to represent objects in the world and for that of words to represent those concepts" (1982: 31). Analytico-referential discourse increases the distance between word and thing through scientific taxonomy, where names suggest a place in

a systematised, artificial hierarchical grid. The taxonomies proposed by scientists and philosophers such as Bacon, Galileo, Hobbes, Linnaeus and Descartes, aim at possession and utility: “the systematic discourse that names and enumerates becomes, *replaces*, the order of the world that it is taken as representing”, and “the signified is seen as congruent, if not in fact identical, with the referent” (Reiss 1982: 35). In this way, Cartesians and empiricists:

established a discursive class ... determined as true, objective, and the permanent manifestation of universal common sense. This marks a denial, or an occultation, of the acknowledgement that the human view of the world is necessarily a ‘perspective’ one. It marks the assertion of such a view as absolute (Reiss 1982: 32).

Thus the distance between the knowledgeable subject and the object of knowledge is multiplied. Lemaire (1976: 331-3) uses the term ‘Promethean’ to describe the logocentric arrogance of analytico-referential discourse: ‘Promethean’ since Prometheus saw himself as more than human, continually overreached himself and ultimately burnt his fingers in the fire of his own destructive technology. Promethean or positivist discourse appropriates the ‘rationality’ of science, and claims objectivity by adopting the ‘externalist’ view of the scientific observer.

2.2.1 Modernism, subjectivity and humanism

Heidegger proposes that the modern subject’s self-image is built upon the premise of its incommensurability with any pre-existing paradigm. This philosophical conception of the modern subject as marking a radical break in historical time, forms, according to Cascardi, the groundwork of the self-consciousness of the modern age (1992: 2). The notion that modern subjectivity constitutes a radical break from previous subjectivities is accompanied by the idea that the modern subject has a more refined and progressive subjectivity than the ‘collective’ subjectivities implicit in pre-modern societies. For Kant, modernity means the progressive refinement of consciousness and subjectivity (Dalmayr 1997: 60). This concept of modern subjectivity as refined and superior is endorsed by the developmental model of human subjectivity which has remained dominant throughout the unfolding of modernity.

The positivist philosopher Comte proposes three progressive stages in the historical (and individual) development of the human mind: the theological (or primitive) stage was characterised by superstition and animism, the second metaphysical stage entailed abstract speculation and reflection, while, in the third and supreme stage, superstition and metaphysics

give way to science (Mautner 2000: 102-103).³³ The progressivist conception of social and subjective development often takes the form of biological models, where the development of modern subjectivity is regarded as the attainment of mental maturity. Thus, according to Kant: “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity ... Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why such a large proportion of men ... nevertheless gladly remain immature for life” (in Dussel 1996: 51). Any subjectivity that is less than, or significantly different to, the rational, autonomous subjectivity proposed as ideal by the Enlightenment, can thus be regarded as culpable and deliberate immaturity.³⁴

The Cartesian sense of the subject as an individual mind, or an individual with a mind, became established in the 18th century and has informed modernist discourse ever since. Descartes’ famous ‘cogito’ argument, which grounds subjectivity in the thinking capacity of the individual, reflects the confidence in the innate powers of the human intellect that was to mobilise the revolutionisation of science and technology during modernity. In addition, the mind/body dualism proposed by Descartes’ conception of a ghostly mind inhabiting a mechanical body, created a model of the relation of consciousness to the physical world that greatly contributed to the instrumentalisation of modern knowledge (Mautner 2000: 134-136). For Descartes, reason was the means by which man³⁵ could become the ‘master and possessor’ of the natural world. Modernity thus became the self-enlightened overcoming of nature and tradition.

Heidegger defines modern subjectivity as a form of self-assertion that culminates in the will to power.³⁶ Modernity may thus be regarded as the historical expression of this self-assertive will – it is the arena in which self-consciousness is fulfilled. The ‘ideal’ modern subject, motivated by the will to know and to explore, “is disengaged from the processes of nature and history, standing over both of these in a posture of confident self-possession” and reason asserts its independence even from the rhetoric of its own discourse (Cascardi 1992: 63). Bauman

³³ Comte calls his philosophy ‘Positivism’ precisely to express this faith in and optimism about moral progress.

³⁴ Bauman concludes that the Enlightenment perception of freedom as something that is chosen by the mature, rational, autonomous subject, becomes pregnant with obligation by virtue of this choice. Freedom, which was previously regarded as a divine attribute, is now represented as a gift bestowed by divine order on the human individual - it becomes a brief and a duty. The freedom to self-create means that suffering and imperfection have no legitimacy, and that they are implicitly self-incurred (1992: xi).

³⁵ Note that I use the male pronoun to refer to the Enlightenment subject, since women were excluded from this subjective model by default.

³⁶ In *Being and Time* (1953[1996]), Heidegger breaks out of the Enlightenment formulation of subjectivity with its subject/object distinction and replaces the Cartesian subject with the phenomenological concept of ‘Dasein’. Heidegger’s criticism of the self-transparent subject and the Kantian ideal of autonomous agency inspired many modernity critiques – including Foucault’s and Derrida’s.

concludes that “this intellectual reflection of the apparent infinity of power was to become the major characteristic of this peculiar West European climate known as ‘modernity’” (1992: 12).

Cahoon suggests that a duality lies at the root of subjectivism: namely the distinction between subjectivity (the subject) and non-subjectivity (the object). This subjectivist dichotomy is the most pervasive characteristic of modernist discourse, systematically dividing the world between the inside (the consciousness of the individual) and the outside (1988: 18). Horkheimer and Adorno express the effect of this duality as follows: “The manifold affinities between existing things are supplanted by the single relationship between the subject who confers meaning and the meaningless object, between rational signification and its accidental bearer” (1972: 7).

The user of analytico-referential discourse not only objectifies the material world, but also denies the subjectivity of other humans in order to make them “hospitable for instrumental meanings” (Bauman 1992: xi). Thus the world is split between will-ful subject and will-less object: “between the privileged actor whose will counted and the rest of the world whose will did not count – having been denied or disregarded” (Bauman 1992: xi). Adorno and Horkheimer (in Cahoon 1988: 183) similarly point out that Enlightenment self-liberation and autonomy produce mastery over nature and over others. Thus self-creation and self-liberation occur in a dialectic relationship with domination and the undoing of the autonomy and subjectivity of others (Cahoon 1988: 182). This is the root of the paradoxical nature of Enlightenment and later humanist conceptions of subjectivity.³⁷

The principle of rational self-consciousness comes closely aligned with the values of individual freedom and autonomy, and is politically enshrined in the creation of the liberal state. According to Pippin (1991: 12), the greatest and key modernist ideal is that of the radical autonomy of the subject.³⁸ Being modern, according to Kant, means to be radically critical. The

³⁷ Taylor points out that the subject as ‘thinking thing’ must be withdrawn even from his own body, which he regards as an object of quasi-scientific manipulation and control. Since the subject inhabits both sides of the body-mind duality, he is divided from within: on the one side the transcendental ‘thinking thing’, on the other the physically embodied and socially constituted object (Taylor in Cascardi 1992: 63). This appearance of man as both subject and object of knowledge, Foucault suggests in *The Order of Things* (1973), characterises modernity as episteme. Foucault regards Kant as the first formulator of the modernist episteme, since Kant first formulated the paradoxical notion of man as organiser of the spectacle in which he appears. The Promethean researcher - the user of analytico-referential discourse - thus objectifies himself as disembodied consciousness that neutrally observes, calculates, measures, weighs and names.

³⁸ Pippin defines this autonomy as “the possibility that human beings can regulate and evaluate their beliefs by rational self-reflection, that they can free themselves from interest, passion, tradition, prejudice and autonomously ‘rule’ their own thoughts, and that they can determine their actions as a result of self-reflection and rational evaluation”. He points out, however, that this ideal made way for the anachronistic Romantic belief that rationality was ‘slave to passion’ (1991: 12).

modern subject can only rely on his reason, and reason is radically independent.³⁹ But the freedom and autonomy of the modern subject bring him into potential conflict with authority:

Modern, liberal society is ... vulnerable to the consequences of an instability in the relationship between freedom and authority; a continual struggle between the desire for freedom and the need for order is embedded within the modern world (Cascardi 1992: 7).

For this reason, Cascardi continues, Lacan insists that one cannot discuss the problem of alienation without first problematising freedom. Hegel also recognises that subjectivity's emancipatory potential is undercut by ambivalence. For Hegel, the principle of subjectivity explains simultaneously the superiority of the modern world and its crisis, in the sense that it represents both a world of progress and of alienated spirit (Dallmayr 1997: 62).

The contradictions inherent to the humanist conception of the subject have motivated numerous critics of modernity to question the universalising tendencies and the implicit exclusivity of humanism in all its guises. Primarily, critics of humanism regard it as hypocritical since only a select few benefit from it and usually at the expense of others.⁴⁰ In *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon exclaims:

That same Europe where they were never done talking of Man, and where they never stopped proclaiming that they were only anxious for the welfare of Man: today we know with what sufferings humanity has paid for every one of their triumphs of the mind (in Young 1990: 120).

It is not a coincidence, Young points out, that the French critique of humanism was launched as part of a general critique of colonialism (1990: 123). In his preface to Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, Sartre pointed out the deep complicity between humanism and colonialism. For Sartre: "Humanism is the counterpart of racism: it is a practice of exclusion" (in Young 1990: 121). It is therefore no coincidence that the formation of a general and 'universal' theory of human nature and the character of the human mind should have unfolded in conjunction with the era of Western colonial expansion.

³⁹ "Man now finds himself a faculty by means of which he differentiates himself from all other things, indeed even from himself in so far as he is affected by objects, and that faculty is reason. This, as pure self-activity, is elevated even above ... understanding ... with respect to ideas, reason shows itself to be such a pure spontaneity that it far transcends anything which sensibility can provide it" (in Pippin 1991: 41).

⁴⁰ The structuralist anthropologist Levi-Strauss proposes that "classical humanism was restricted not only with respect to its object, but with respect to the privileged class which benefited from it. The exotic humanism of the 19th century found itself linked to the industrial and commercial interests that supported it and to which it owed its existence. After the aristocratic humanism of the Renaissance and the bourgeois humanism of the 19th century, ethnology notes the appearance ... of a humanism doubly universal [democratic humanism]" (in Boon 1982: 47).

It is in the Enlightenment that the human emerges as a highly political and ideologically charged category, and it is here that the notion of a universal human nature becomes inextricably conflated with modern, bourgeois European values. In his short essay "The Great Family of Man", Barthes (1972: 368) explodes the myth of a global human community. He points out that accounts of a global oneness that underlies diversity always begin with differences, then propose a reassuringly sentimental notion of a common human essence (which he calls 'Adamism') that effectively serves to override and elide those differences.⁴¹ Thus, Price reminds us (1989a: 37):

The Family of Man encompasses not only brotherhood but also sibling rivalry, and the recognition of shared concerns or pleasures coexists and competes with an insistence on those essential features that separate the Civilized and Primitive branches of the genealogy. The Noble Savage and the Pagan Cannibal are in effect a single figure, described by a distant Westerner in two different frames of mind; portrayals of Primitive Man can be tilted either way in their recognition that he is at once a 'brother' and an 'Other'.

For Young, the violence of the humanist perspective of modernity resides in its claims to universalism (1990: 124). The universalist declines to consider that the ideal definition of Man as articulated in the notion of self-determination is predicated on the exclusion and marginalisation of his Others (Young: 1990:122).⁴² The invitation extended to the non-Western world to 'join the universal brotherhood of man' implies an equation between the category of humanness and European civilisation – it reveals the extent to which the heroic 'I' of humanism is a bourgeois, male European. The invitation to assimilate suggests the non-human status of those not yet modern and progressive. Fanon describes this double logic as follows:

Bourgeois ideology ... which is the proclamation of an essential quality between men, manages to appear logical in its own eyes by inviting the sub-men to become

⁴¹ "This myth functions in two stages: first the difference between human morphology is asserted, exoticism is insistently stressed, the infinite variations of the species, the diversity in skins, skulls and customs are made manifest, the image of Babel is complacently projected over that of the world. Then, from this pluralism, a type of unity is magically produced: man is born, works, laughs and dies everywhere in the same way; and if there still remains in these actions some ethnic peculiarity, at least one hints that there is underlying each one an identical 'nature', that their diversity is only formal and does not belie the existence of a common mould" (Barthes 1956: 368).

⁴² It is significant that the humanist belief in man's capacity for self-cultivation and the universal progress of mankind was particularly influential in the 19th century in the English-speaking world, when British Imperialism was at its peak (Mautner 2000: 256).

human, and to take as their prototype Western humanity as incarnated in the Western bourgeoisie (in Young 1990: 123).

The later, Enlightenment formulation of Humanism, Clifford points out, silences diversity and oppresses plurality with its rhetoric of sentimental universal values: "... it is a general feature of humanist common denominators that they are meaningless, since they bypass the local cultural codes that make personal experience articulate". He therefore describes humanism as "a privilege invented by a totalizing Western liberalism" (in Young 1990: 131).⁴³

The question whether human nature was on the one hand malleable and thus capable of perfection (a humanist perspective), or on the other hand biologically predisposed to egoism and evil, sparked heated debate in the 18th century.⁴⁴ The humanist conception of the subject as malleable and capable of improvement became dominant in the 19th century. The idea of the rational individual as a human being whose conduct is shaped by his knowledge, and whose knowledge is in turn shaped by the knowledge-givers, creates space for a perception of subjects as objects of purposeful redirection (Bauman 1992: 11). Social engineering may thus ironically be regarded as an offshoot of the notion of human freedom. Although the two conflicting but not wholly incommensurable views of human nature continued to inform political practices throughout modernity, the first view developed into the dominant 'pastoral' perception of the democratic nation state. The opposing view, that human nature needs strict regimentation and control, manifested in the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. The apartheid state, for instance, employed a curious admixture of pastoralism and totalitarianism in its approach to the black South African subject. The perception of the black subject as simultaneously an object of purposeful redirection *and* an object requiring regimentation and control emerged particularly strongly in art teaching practices, as will be demonstrated in Chapter 4.

2.2.2 Modernism, order and the modern State

If the experience of modernity is indeed a state of mind that is acutely aware of the contingent and of the fleeting moment, as Foucault suggests, and if it can indeed be described

⁴³ The Enlightenment subject has been called 'the bourgeois subject', in order to make the point that the modern project was essentially class-based. The universal, 'value-free' and 'context-free' nature and rights of Man enshrined by the Enlightenment, are in fact located in the entrepreneurial, bourgeois class, which was in the process of establishing the supremacy of its rights over and above the inherited rights of the aristocracy.

⁴⁴ In the second half of the 18th century the view predominated that collectivist systems were needed to control the fundamentally egoistic tendencies of humans, and that human nature, which could be irredeemably evil in competitive societies, had to be subjected to regimented totalitarian control. Opposition to this view, as articulated by Voltaire and Diderot, laid the foundations for a modern, liberal state in which undesirable behaviour could be reformed by means of education and law (Crocker 1969: 25-26).

as an often painful consciousness of the uneasiness of the present, Bauman proposes that the response to this existential unease is the compulsive creation of order (1990; 1991; 1992). Modernity as discourse is primarily engaged in the constant invention of strategies to create foundations and boundaries where none are seen to exist. The roots of the modernist compulsion to order, classify, name, and control, lie in the anxiety accompanying the decline of a divinely structured and meaningful universe. Since order is perceived as no longer divine, but man-made, and thus artificial, it becomes a matter of power, will, force and calculation (Bauman 1992: 6).

But if “modern consciousness is the suspicion or awareness of the inconclusiveness of extant order”, as Bauman (1992: 6) suggests, modernist discourse is engaged in the constant overthrow of existing structures in pursuit of better or more complete ordering systems. Thus the drive to order ironically contributes towards the perpetual destabilising (and anxiety inducing) ‘dissolving’ effects of modernity. Modern consciousness undermines order but “perpetuates the ordering practice by disqualifying its achievements and laying bare its defeats” (Bauman 1991: 9). For Bauman, as for Foucault, modernist discourse is thus first and foremost engaged in the perpetual task of creating, dismantling and re-creating order, structure and hierarchy.⁴⁵ Bauman describes the task of order as the most central (and impossible) of the many tasks modernity has set itself: “It is the archetype for all other tasks, one that renders all other tasks mere metaphors of itself” (1992: 4). Order becomes the task of controlling and eliminating contingency. This overriding drive to order, Arendt (1967) suggests, constitutes modernity’s potential for totalitarianism, and, I will demonstrate later, liberally contributes to the pervasive ambivalence of modernist discourse.

According to Bauman, the Enlightenment notion that culture is ‘man-made’ raises the unprecedented ambition of the modern state to create order by ‘making society’ (1992: 10). Society is thus regarded not as something organic or natural, nor as divinely appointed, but as an engineered totality in which difference must be brought to homogeneity.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Foucault regards the concern with order as characteristic in particular of what he terms ‘the Classical age’ (the Enlightenment), which was regulated by one, dominant episteme. He proposes that a rupture (which ‘shattered the space of order’) occurred towards the end of the 18th century and allowed a radical transition to take place from the theme of order to that of history (1973). I do not adhere to Foucault’s finer periodisation of modernist discourse in this thesis, but I concede that my somewhat monolithic and seamless portrayal of modernist discourse must not preclude an understanding of the episteme as wounded by successive ruptures and reversals.

⁴⁶ The German sociologist and critic of modernity Weber (1987) ascribes this ordering process to the rationalising function of the modern state, which assigns to each of its subjects methodical and specialised tasks to assist the state’s modern capitalist impulse of endless accumulation.

How to organise and control individual subjects remains a most pervasive problem of the modern age. Cascardi (1992: 61) ascribes the inherent ambiguities of modern social control to the conflict generated between freedom and power in modern subjectivity:

[I]t can be seen that a society comprised of subjects will tend to be an atomistic association of individuals whose efforts at achieving collective ends will come into conflict with the purposes and aims of individual members of the group.

The attempt to find solutions to this problematic resulted in the formulation of a vast variety of utopian schemes which aimed at achieving reconciliation between order and freedom. Most of these theorists of Utopia chose urban planning as a vehicle and master-metaphor of the 'perfecting' of the world: "In the city of reason, there were to be no winding roads, no cul-de-sacs and no unattended sites left to chance – and thus no vagabonds, vagrants or nomads" (Bauman 1992: xv). Toulmin coined the term '*cosmopolis*' to describe the intellectual model of an engineered, orderly universe in which universal and absolute standards of truth determine the hierarchical harmony of the "obsessively legislating, defining, structuring, segregating, classifying, recording and universalizing state" (in Bauman 1992: xiv). This model of the state suggests the modern wedlock between absolute truth and absolute power, while claims to universalism meant that "dissent had been discredited and delegitimized before it was even spoken" (Bauman 1992: xiv). According to Bauman the numerous Utopias proposed by a variety of sociologists and modernist theorists in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, represent worlds without margins, worlds from which the Other has been totally expunged (Bauman 1992: xiv).

Because order constitutes an artificial imposition on chaotic nature, it has to be constantly maintained. Thus constant supervision and policing becomes the hallmark of modernity. Foucault (in *Discipline and Punish*, 1979) uses the term 'panopticon' to describe the supervising capacity of the modern state. This term is derived from a model devised by Bentham to monitor movements of prisoners from a central position in such a way that the prisoners are unable to tell when or whether they are being observed, which would have the desired result of self-censorship.⁴⁷ Thus the monitoring and surveilling capacities of the modern state result in a process of self-subjection.

⁴⁷ Bentham was an English Enlightenment philosopher and social reformer mainly concerned with theorising jurisprudence.

For Foucault the state is primarily a disciplinary formation (1979). In its modernist mode, the power of the state seeps in a capillary fashion into the very construction of its subjects – regulating even their bodily routines and their self-perception and relations with other subjects. It is through the inculcation of

a deeply interiorised, individuated sense of self-regulation – through its various techniques of surveillance; its clinics, schools, prisons, and other sites of control; its censuses, surveys and cognate forms of serialisation and accounting; its modes of knowing and objectifying personhood through the ‘human sciences’; its ‘natural’ institutions like the family and fatherhood, established religion and organised recreation, competitive sports and commodified regimes of consumption – that the state imposes order on its citizenry (Comaroff 2001: 45-46).

For the members of the Frankfurt school, as well as for Foucault and Bauman, the utopia of perfect order is infected, from its inception in the Enlightenment, with the propensity towards totalitarianism.

Foucault ascribes the power of the modern state to the fact that it has integrated the pastoral power of the Christian church in its political shape (1984: 422). Pastoral power is salvation oriented and linked with the production of truth, and is particularly encompassing since it undertakes to see to the personal wellbeing of each and every one of its subjects. The salvation offered by the modern state takes the form of a promise to provide health, security and protection to each individual subject, and thus extends the state’s sphere of influence from the public to the private spheres.⁴⁸ Foucault perceives the power of the state as embedded in intimately conjoined individualising and totalising effects. Both the individualising and the totalising capacity of the state reside in its naming, describing and classifying function, which divides subjects into hierarchical ranks according to their specialised and minutely designated roles. Foucault thus perceives the state’s individuating function as a form of subjection that also constitutes the final totalising objectification of each subject (1984).⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Arendt’s modernity critique ascribes many of the totalitarian tendencies and ills of the modern state to this blurring of boundaries between the private and the public realms (1967).

⁴⁹ Foucault defines the subject as a ‘subjected individual’, thus blurring the power dynamics of the binary of subject/object. He proposes three major processes of objectification whereby individuals are turned into subjects:

- The sciences, where, for instance, linguistics transform the individual into a speaking subject.
- The dividing practices of modern institutions.
- The way in which humans turn themselves into subjects, particularly as regards sexuality and the panoptic effect of self-surveillance (1984).

According to Bauman (1992: 20-29) the pastoral and social-engineering ambitions of the modern state are frequently phrased in the metaphor of gardening in which the wild, uncultivated human condition has to be ordered and nurtured. By systematic breeding and weeding, the garden of society can be purged of undesirable weeds and useful plants can be encouraged and tenderly propagated. Mudimbe (1988: 1) suggests that the colonial enterprise was at least partially motivated by the modernist compulsion to create order (to transform the wilderness of 'primitive' lands into the garden of civilisation). The etymology of the term 'colonialism' confirms this, since it is derived from the Latin *colĕre* (to cultivate or design).

Clearly the apartheid state, with its obsessively maintained boundaries and engineered hierarchies, must be regarded as a quintessentially modern state. The classifying impulse of the apartheid state, as will be shown in Chapter 4, emerges in compulsive attempts to find suitable categories for the boundary-transgressing anachronism of modern black art. It is significant, moreover, that the township – which must be regarded as the ultimate attempt to contain the black presence in South Africa – should have been used to designate modern black art for most of the 20th century. Further, in both its pastoral and its policing aspects, the apartheid state demonstrates how utopian engineering can result in rampant totalitarianism.

2.2.3 Modernism and ambivalence

In *Modernity and Ambivalence*, (1991) Bauman suggests that an inevitable by-product of the modernist compulsion to create order, is the proliferation of ambiguity and ambivalence – an ambivalence so pervasive that it points to an aporia at the very heart of the Enlightenment project. Numerous authors have commented on this ambivalence and the sometimes downright contradictory nature of modernist discourse.⁵⁰

Bauman suggests that the pervasive ambivalence of modernist discourse is the inevitable by-product of language: "Ambivalence, the possibility of assigning an object or an event to more than one category, is a language-specific disorder: a failure of the naming (segregating) function that language is meant to perform" (1992: 1). Bauman stresses that this ambivalence should not be regarded as a pathology of language or speech, but rather as "the alter ego of language, and its permanent companion – indeed, its normal condition".

⁵⁰ See for instance Bauman (1992), Parekh (1995), Bhabha (1984), and Pippin (1991).

Since modernist discourse is obsessed with naming and classifying as an intrinsic process of the creation of order, it is particularly susceptible to ambivalence. Classifying constitutes the segregation and separating out of things and concepts and thus postulates the existence of discreet entities - it is therefore closely implicated in the creation of a utopian and rational order. Thus modernist language, according to Bauman, "posits itself between a solidly founded, orderly world fit for human habitation, and a contingent world of randomness", and it "strives to sustain order and to deny or suppress randomness and contingency" (1991:3).

Bauman suggests that ambivalence arises when a situation or thing does not fit into any class, or if it falls, as often happens, into several classes at once. It is one of the conundrums of the classifying act that, in striving to prevent ambivalence, ambivalence is generated. Attempts to contain this ambivalence in turn call for an increase in the classifying effort. Thus, for Bauman, modernist discourse and modernity in general represent a "particularly bitter and relentless war against ambivalence" which takes the form of ever more detailed classifying systems (1992: 3).

Parekh (1995: 81) exposes the ambivalence of liberalism by exploring its power abuses, from colonialism to rampant industrialisation and capitalist labour exploitation.⁵¹ He suggests that liberalism "is both egalitarian and inegalitarian, it stresses both the unity of mankind and the hierarchy of cultures, it is both tolerant and intolerant, peaceful and violent, pragmatic and dogmatic, sceptical and self-righteous". He goes on to suggest that these paradoxes stem from the fact that liberalism rested since its inception on assumptions with inegalitarian implications. These implications are the inevitable outflow of a monistic assumption of a universally common human nature and one "acceptable and worthy" form of individual and collective human life (quintessentially defined as Western and modern).

Modernity thus has deeply embedded contradictions that emanate from different subjective models adopted in different modernist discourses. It is the plurality of modern subjective discourses that allowed, for instance, the emancipatory language of humanism to co-exist with the economic practice of slavery.⁵²

⁵¹ Parekh (1995) mentions, for instance, that Mill and Locke, philosophers of human freedom and founding formulators of liberal autonomy and individualism, saw despotism as a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, and advocated non-violent colonisation.

⁵² Dussel describes this as "the Janus face of modernity" where "... one face is the rational emancipatory nucleus that ... [is] the ethical position that respects every person as person, as equal ... and as possible participant in an ideal communication community. The other face of Janus is exactly the negation of this principle, which could be enunciated as: some persons are superior as persons over other persons" (1996: 50).

Mudimbe (1988: 1), in *The Invention of Africa*, proposes that the source of the ambiguity and contradictions in European conceptions of Africa proceeded from a schism between two dominant views in the Enlightenment: “the Hobbesian picture of a pre-European Africa, in which there was no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continued fear, and danger of violent death” and “the Rousseauian picture of an African golden age of perfect liberty, equality and fraternity”.⁵³ This particular form of ambivalence is still sustained today, as writers on contemporary ‘postmodern’ primitivism will testify.⁵⁴

The quintessentially modernist ambivalences listed above emerge particularly virulently in South African art writing about modern black art. Some of these ambiguities flow from the taxonomic imperative (thus bearing out Bauman’s theory about the origins of modernist ambivalence), while the tension between universalism and difference, and the co-existence of the noble savage/cannibal savage also contribute substantially to some of the most flagrant contradictions and ambivalences in these texts, as I will discuss in my deconstruction in Chapter 4.

2.2.4 Modernism and progress

Reiss suggests that analytico-referential discourse has, built into it, a historical linearity that promotes process as progress (1982: 357). Modernity as discourse is thus characterised by a preoccupation with progress as the teleological unfolding of human potential. This obsession with progress has its roots in the Enlightenment where authors such as Turgot and Corcocet first proposed the concept of inevitable and unlimited progress (Crocker 1969: 14).⁵⁵ The idea of progress became widely held only in the 19th century, however, particularly after Darwin’s publications about the evolution of species, when progress became the ‘faith’ of modernity and science its ‘church’.

⁵³ Torgovnick suggests that, even in contemporary first world societies, the notion of ‘primitive peoples’ continues to exist “in a cherished series of dichotomies: by turns gentle, in tune with nature, paradisiacal, ideal – or violent, in need of control; what we should emulate or, alternatively, what we should fear; noble savages or cannibals” (1990: 3).

⁵⁴ See for instance Torgovnick (1996).

⁵⁵ It must however be pointed out that Enlightenment thinkers were by no means unanimous in their attitude towards progress. Rousseau, for instance, launched a heated attack on intellectual and scientific progress in his *Discours sur les Sciences et les arts*, where he denounced it as instrument of social oppression and the cause of moral deterioration (Crocker 1969: 34). Note, however, that his criticism is levelled against the *value* of progress, but not against the *concept* of progress as such.

Giddens (1990: 48) points out that a teleological perspective emerged from “a religious context which emphasized teleology and the achievement of God’s grace ... Without these preceding orientations, the Enlightenment would scarcely have been possible in the first place”. The promotion of unfettered reason did not unsettle the conception of providence, but merely reshaped it: “Divine providence was replaced by providential progress” (1990: 48). Giddens suggests that the long-standing influence of social evolutionism is one of the reasons why the discontinuous character of modernity has not been sufficiently appreciated – he points out that even Marx, who stressed discontinuity, conceived of human history as having one overall direction or destiny. The presumption of social evolution thus constitutes one of the most persistent Grand Narratives of the modern age (1990: 13).

It stands to reason that modern Western ideas of progress as the teleological unfolding of human reason exerted a considerable influence on how history was conceived. Both Giddens (1990) and Young (1990) suggest that ‘historicity’ is intrinsically a phenomenon of modernity. The production of one linear, universal and providential ‘History’ constitutes a ‘use of history to make history’ and permeates all modern ideologies. Marx’s historical materialism, for instance, implies that history has intrinsic form and teleology – a form and teleology which primarily serve to justify a privileged position for the West.

Theories regarding the ‘evolution’ of the human race propose one, universal line of development for all peoples.⁵⁶ Hall quotes Meek with regard to the idea of a ‘naturally’ progressing universal human society (in Hall & Gieben 1992: 313):

In its most specific form, the theory was that society had ‘naturally’ or ‘normally’ progressed over time through four more or less distinct and consecutive stages, each corresponding to a different mode of subsistence, these stages being defined as hunting, pasturage, agriculture and commerce. To each of these modes of subsistence ... there corresponded different sets of ideas and institutions relating to law, property, and government and also different sets of customs, manners and morals.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ This does not mean that there was absolute concurrence about the origins and development of the human species. There was substantial conflict between monogenetic and polyphyletic (or multilineal) theories of human evolution. The latter saw the different races as competing groups or species situated along different branches of an evolutionary tree. Monogeneticism, however, was the orthodox or dominant theory (Dubow 1995: 50).

⁵⁷ The Enlightenment naturalist and philosopher Rousseau proposed four levels of development of the human race: a primitive state of contented oneness with nature; the development of primitive egalitarian societies; gradually decaying societies based on inequality and constant struggle; and finally the ideal, controlled and egalitarian society of ‘contract’ as potentially achievable under modernity (Reiss: 358). Hume, in his essay “Of the

Hall points out that Enlightenment thinkers believed that there was only one route to civilisation and social development, and that the emerging 'science of society' concerned itself with the study of forces "which propelled all societies, by stages, along this same path" (Hall & Gieben 1992: 312-313).

In the universal progressive route that all societies were programmed to follow, it was taken for granted that Western Europe formed the vanguard. For Hegel, Europe constituted "the absolute end of history" (quoted in Dussel 1996: 51), while Africa, due to its purported isolation from world events and under the influence of its turgid climate, remained caught in a pre-historic time before time. The universalistic developmental theory meant that cultures that were deemed as further back on the linear scale of development could be scrutinised as examples of European pre-history.⁵⁸ For Van Niekerk (1998), this exalted and heroic self-image of the West determined the anthropological exploits of Western civilisation. The view of itself as progressive and advanced enables it to see the Other as a relic of its own vanquished, pre-scientific past.⁵⁹

The 'religion' of progress was most emphatically articulated by the positivist philosopher Comte, who saw modernity and science as the advance of orderly progress and progressive order.⁶⁰ According to Bauman, Comte saw modern progress not merely as a thrust for power, but as a mission and as proof of moral righteousness and cause of pride in achievement (Bauman 1992: xiv). Redner suggests that: "Just as in the language of faith God cannot be denied or even seriously questioned, so too in the languages of Progress it is Progress itself that has that status." Redner describes progress as an "unparalleled drive for power" in which:

All other societies and cultures were crushed or exterminated or forced to engage with us in our race of Progress ...All the natural and human resources were put at our disposal to be transformed in accordance with our sovereign will. This willed

Populousness of Ancient Nations" similarly proposes a theory of history as a living organism in which the human race develops in time through stages of infancy, youth and maturity (in Eze 2000: 29 – 30).

⁵⁸ Upon the publication of his *History of America*, the Scottish Enlightenment historian Burke expressed the lofty perspective the European had from his elevated vantage point at the summit of development as follows: "The great map of Mankind is unrolled at once, and there is no state or gradation of barbarism, and no mode of refinement which we have not at the same moment under our view; the very different civility of Europe and China; the barbarism of Persia and Abyssinia; the erratic manners of Tartary and of Arabia; the savage state of North America and of New Zealand" (quoted in Hall & Gieben 1992: 312).

⁵⁹ Van Niekerk quotes the 19th-century anthropologist Tylor to demonstrate this heroic self-perception: "It is a harsh, and at times even painful office of ethnography to expose the remains of crude old culture which have passed into harmful superstition, and to mark these out for destruction" (1998: 58). Thus the West delegated to itself the role of at once aiding progress and actively removing hindrances to it.

⁶⁰ Comte in fact started a Positivist church - a 'religion of humanity' in which science and reason were the only articles of faith (Mautner 2000: 102-103).

thrust of power was justified in the name of an unlimited future of Man (quoted in Bauman 1992: xiv).

The progressive spirit of modern European civilisation is celebrated as freedom, and tradition denigrated as slavery.⁶¹ This concept of the inevitable supercession of tradition by a triumphant modernity, perceived the West's expansion as inevitable and indeed as representing universal salvation from the restrictive confines of tradition. Even Marx, arch-critic of capitalist modernity, is never critical of progress as such, and perceives it as inevitable and desirable. Marx concludes that only Western modernity contains the conditions needed for progress and development, since capitalism introduces the dynamics that are conducive to class struggle and the revolutionary overthrow of the bourgeoisie. Marx also stresses the necessary role of capitalist colonialism in the destruction of pre-capitalist modes which prohibit other cultures from entering into a progressive historical path (Hall & Gieben 1992: 314-315). An ideology of progress also underpins the totalitarian excesses of the 20th century. Bauman suggests that the social engineering presided over by Stalin and Hitler were not exceptional outbursts of barbarism fundamentally alien to the spirit of modernity, but rather the "legitimate offspring of the modern spirit, of that urge to assist and speed up the progress of mankind towards perfection that was throughout the most prominent hallmark of the modern age" (1991: 29).

This notion of progress became particularly strongly articulated after the advent of the Darwinian revolution, when biology was implemented to "create the kind of moral universe in which nature reflected society and vice versa" (Jones, quoted in Dubow 1995: 8). According to Reiss, Darwinism provides a model of "an unbroken set of developmental moments between the most primitive state of nature and the most advanced condition of culture imaginable" (1982: 358) and moreover "inscribes violence in society as a necessary and forever inevitable element". Thus Peirce criticises Darwinism for being "but the transference of 'predatory capitalism' to the domain of nature" (in Reiss 1982: 362). Social Darwinism and its implications as regards formulations of race and cultural development are considered in greater depth in Chapter 3.

⁶¹ The Italian Futurists epitomise, for Berman, the arrogance implicit in this modern concept of progress: "Comrades, we tell you now that the triumphant progress of science makes changes in humanity inevitable, changes that are hacking an abyss between those docile slaves of tradition and us free moderns who are confident in the radiant splendour of our future" (from one of the Futurist Manifestoes, in Berman 1983: 24).

Approaches to modern black art were strongly informed by teleological assumptions about a progressively unfolding universal human history. This belief underpinned not only categorisation, as I will demonstrate, but also impacted profoundly on teaching practices and on the interpretation of the work of black artists in South Africa.

2.2.5 Modernism, dualism and alterity

The logocentric discourse of modernity is characterised by, to use Fanon's words, a "delirium of opposites" (in Van Niekerk 1988: 55). The dualistic structure of Western thought emerges most strongly in the following sets of contrasting pairs: culture/nature, male/female; mind/body; master/slave; universal/particular; self/other; reason/emotion; civilised/primitive.⁶² Dualism, as I have mentioned in Chapter 1, is strategically essential to the construction, as Plumwood puts it, "of a devalued and sharply demarcated sphere of Otherness", which is why she calls it "the logic of colonization" (1993: 41-68).⁶³ She further suggests that a dualism results from "a certain kind of denied dependency on a subordinated Other" (1993: 41), and that the identity of both sides of the relation is shaped by this denied relationship.

For Plumwood, these dualisms form a web or network in which one easily blends into the other and in which all dualisms are linked by "well-traveled pathways of conventional or philosophical assumption" (1993: 45-46). In this tightly knit web the key concepts of humanity, rationality and masculinity, Plumwood suggests, provide for each other "models of appropriate relations to their respective dualised contrasts of nature, the physical or material, and the feminine" (1993: 46). This gulf between the dual pairs is used to support the 'inferiority' of women, people of other races or cultures, and manual workers. The construction of dualisms naturalises domination, and yields hyperseparated orders of being.

For Plumwood, hyperseparation or radical exclusion entails the denial, suppression or elimination of any continuity or similarity between the dualised spheres (1993: 49). The inferiorised Other is relegated to the background or isolated in ghettos in order to deny the dominant sphere's reliance or dependency on it. The subordinate Other is represented as inessential - mere background to the Master's foreground. The indispensable contribution of the negated Other (as labourer, child-bearer, child-raiser or natural resource) is consistently

⁶² Plumwood points out that several of these dualisms were formulated in ancient philosophy, but that they were not only retained, but refined in post-Enlightenment discourse, where their ancient formulation remains as residues or "layers of sediment deposited by past oppressions" (1993: 43).

⁶³ Plumwood's description is particularly apt if one considers that the 1897 world fair at Brussels displayed tapestries titled 'Barbarism and Civilization', 'Fetishism and Christianity', 'Polygamy and Family Life' and 'Slavery and Freedom' to demonstrate the benefits and virtues of the colonial enterprise (Hochschild 1999: 176).

underplayed or entirely denied. The Master's view is presented as universal, and it never occurs to him that there might be perspectives from which *he* is the background. Plumwood points out that, in fact, "the master more than the slave requires the other to define his boundaries and identity, since these are defined *against* the inferiorised other [original emphasis]" (1993: 48).⁶⁴

If modernity may be briefly defined as 'an awareness of being modern', as suggested earlier, then Europe's consciousness of itself may be regarded as the product of a particular kind of preoccupation with and negation of the *not* modern. According to Hall, the formation of a particular pattern of modern Western thought, language and representation has the concepts of 'the West' and 'the Rest' at its centre. Hall proposes that since the Enlightenment "the West and the Rest became two sides of a single coin", and that 'the West', as a trope or idealist construction, took on shape and meaning only in relation to 'the Rest' (Hall & Gieben 1992: 276).⁶⁵

Hall stresses that the Enlightenment, as the matrix of modern social science, provided the language in which the West's modern self-image first came to be defined.⁶⁶ In Enlightenment discourse, as has been pointed out, the West was the model, the prototype and the measure of social progress. The rest was crucial to this process of self-exaltation, since without it the West would not have been able to recognise and represent itself as the summit of human history:⁶⁷

⁶⁴ To illustrate the degree to which the self-definition of rational subjectivity occurs in a process of negation of the Other, Easley quotes the 19th-century British physician Dr JH Bennet: "The principle feature which appears to me to characterize the Caucasian race, to raise it immeasurably above all other races is the power that many of its male members have of advancing the horizon of science, of penetrating beyond the existing limits of knowledge ... I am not aware that the female members of our race participate in this mental power, in this supreme development of the human mind" (1981: 139).

⁶⁵ Ricoeur meditates on the psychological effects of the eruption of the Other in the European consciousness: "When we discover that there are several cultures instead of just one and consequently at the time when we acknowledge the end of a sort of cultural monopoly, be it illusory or real, we are threatened with destruction by our own discovery. Suddenly it becomes possible that there are just others; that we ourselves are an 'other' among others" (1965: 278). Accordingly Dussel proposes that the beginnings of modern Western subjectivity lie not with Descartes' 'cogito', as is commonly claimed, but with the 'ego conquiro' of a century earlier (1996: 51).

⁶⁶ According to Hall, the West and the *idea* of the West were produced in tandem. Once the *idea* of the West had been produced, it became productive *of* the West and became the organising concept in a paradigmatic way of thinking and speaking. The West was not formed into a distinct type of society and set of discourses simply by processes internal to itself, but also through how it came to represent itself in relation to Other worlds and systems. Modernity and its inseparable companion, colonialism, harnessed the West and the rest into the same time frame, and inextricably conjoined them as related elements of the same discourse (Hall & Gieben 1992: 276-330).

⁶⁷ Thus many of the leading figures of French Enlightenment (Hall names Diderot, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Turgot, and Rousseau) used studies of the early American Indians to ponder the nature of society and mankind (Hall & Gieben 1992: 314).

The figure of 'the Other', banished to the edge of the conceptual world and constructed as the absolute opposite, the negation, of everything which the West stood for, reappeared at the very centre of the discourse of civilization, refinement, modernity and development in the West, 'the Other' was the dark side – forgotten, repressed and denied; the reverse image of enlightenment and modernity (Hall & Gieben 1992: 314).

Cixous ascribes the modernist prominence of the dualism of self and other on the institutionalisation of Hegel's dialectics in Western praxis. Since Hegel produced his notorious 'master/slave' parable:

There has to be some 'other' – no master without a slave, no economico-political power without exploitation, no dominant class without cattle under the yoke, no 'Frenchmen' without wogs, no Nazis without Jews, no property without exclusion ... (in Young 1990: 3).⁶⁸

Similarly, Levinas proposes that Hegel's philosophy epitomises the West's allergic horror of the Other. Levinas deplores the violence implicit in the process of knowledge "which appropriates and sublates the essence of the other into itself" (Young 1990: 15). Knowledge is used as an instrument of possession, a means of appropriating or grasping, and thereby nullifying and negating, exteriority. So History becomes "a blinding of the other, and ... a laborious procession of the same" (in Young 1990: 75).

The modernist intolerance of difference not only manifests in relation to a radical exteriority, but also to local alterities.⁶⁹ Thus modernity is not only constructed in relation to a radical Otherness exterior to itself, but also in relation to alterities within. Foucault's genealogies of the systematic separating out and institutionalisation of mentally aberrant and criminal subjects of modern society, demonstrate the degree to which the state suppresses or eliminates the non-normative within its own boundaries.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Young affirms the importance of Hegel on the development of Western imperialism, since Hegel rationalised the appropriation of the Other "as a form of knowledge which uncannily simulates the project of 19th century imperialism; the construction of knowledges which all operate through forms of expropriation and incorporation of the other mimics at a conceptual level the geographical and economic absorption of the non-European world by the West" (1990: 3).

⁶⁹ Feminist theoreticians, of course, first opened the wound of difference in the seamless totality of the modernist utopia and relentlessly continue its anatomisation. Bauman's acute analysis of the dynamics of strangerhood that underpinned the Holocaust systematically exposes the totalising tendencies of modern civilisation and the desperate attempts to contain foreignness within its boundaries (1990; 1991).

⁷⁰ See *Discipline and Punish* (1979) and *Madness and Civilization*. (1967). Derrida criticised Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* for not recognising 'madness' as a repressed alterity or Otherness at work *in* reason rather than

Desire, as first Freud and later Lacan pointed out, plays a central role in the suppression of alterity. It is due to the suppression of illicit desire that theories of race, as Young so brilliantly demonstrates in *Colonial Desire* (1996), were also covert theories of desire. This insight drastically resituates the dialectics of self and other, and suggests that the Other always-already resides within and disruptively breeds ambiguity and ambivalence in the utopia of pure reason and absolute order. Crocker mentions that a strong current of romantic primitivism ran through the Enlightenment: stories about noble savages living in harmonious and peaceful co-existence with nature, and dreams of simple societies with little or no government in which man's natural goodness led to happiness (1969: 27). This primitivist longing surfaces repeatedly throughout modernity, and follows it like its own shadow. It formed the driving force, as Rhodes (1994) pointed out, behind most of the major Modernist 'movements' (Romanticism, Expressionism and Cubism, to name but a few) and provided the cultures of modernity with much of their oppositional and rebellious force.⁷¹ The suppressed alterities of modernity, and the social and emotional pathologies these give rise to, bubble to the surface as primitivism *and* racism; the idealisation of women *and* their systematic denigration.

Bhabha commented on the profound ambivalence of colonial responses to the Other as object of both desire and derision. The repertoire of conflicting positions adopted in colonial discourse stems from the production of the colonised as irreconcilably alien, exotic and 'Other', yet entirely knowable and visible. In *Location of Culture*, he describes the entire objective of modernist/colonialist discourse as "to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction" and adds that "colonial discourse produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an 'Other' and yet entirely knowable and visible" (1994: 70). The Other, as an object of knowledge and surveillance, is voyeuristically and fetishistically transformed into an object of obsession, sexual fantasy and paranoia. This equivocation, he suggests, indicates anxiety and a conflictual economy at work. The anxiety provoked by the concept of the Other, Bhabha proposes, flows from the simultaneous disavowal and hyper-projection of difference. For Bhabha, colonialism is the mirror that reflects on its surface the 'perverse contradictions' of Enlightenment humanism. In colonial discourse the coloniser is

exterior to it – a criticism that Foucault acknowledged and employed to construct a more nuanced and complex perception of alterity in subsequent publications (Young 1990: 71).

⁷¹ Bauman suggests that modernity forces culture in opposition to itself, and points out that Modernist art both undermines and serves modern existence (1991: 9).

tethered to his dark reflection, the shadow of colonized man, that splits his presence, distorts his outline, breaches his boundaries, repeats his actions at a distance, disturbs and divides the very time of his being ... Man as his alienated image, not Self and Other but the 'Otherness' of the Self inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity' (Bhabha 1986: xiv-xv).

Thus, for Bhabha, colonial discourse betrays a dissonance inherent in Western knowledge and subjectivity, and illustrates the ambivalences that flow from the aporia at the core of the modernist quest for absolute sovereignty and knowledge (1983).

2.2.6 Modernism and the nature/culture divide

Bauman suggests that the entire project of modernity, and in particular the modern science that gave it momentum, boils down to the ambition to conquer nature: "Modern science was born out of the overwhelming ambition to conquer Nature and subordinate it to human needs" (1991: 39). According to Bauman, the notion of 'nature' was invented in conjunction with the construction of 'culture' as a product of reason and human will.⁷² Nature, as the 'Other' of culture, came to mean something to be subordinated. This entails a vision of the natural world as inert, passive material available for manipulation by human will and accessible for human purpose: "Anything that spoils the order, the harmony, the design, and thus refuses purpose and meaning, is Nature. Once it is Nature, it is to be treated as such. And it is Nature because it is so treated" (1991: 40).⁷³

Both Van Niekerk (1998: 63) and Plumwood (1997: 73-103) point out that the dualistic concept of nature and culture has its roots in ancient Greek philosophy. Van Niekerk points out, however, that the Greeks regarded nature as the embodiment of logos, and insisted on the inherent rational structure of nature, whereas the modernist nature/culture divide, with its strong exploitative, instrumental purpose, involved the total disenchantment of nature (1998:

⁷² Plumwood regards the reason/nature duality as the 'master' duality of modernity, a duality which subsumes virtually all the other dualities such as civilised/primitive, mind/body, production/reproduction (1997: 45). According to Plumwood, in this contrast set, virtually everything of the 'superior' side of the set is subsumed under reason, while the negative corresponds to nature.

⁷³ In *Against Dryness* Murdoch points out that apparently contradictory modern philosophies such as Logical Positivism and Existentialism share a similar instrumentalist view of nature as possessing no inherent qualities, and as constituting a mere quantity of matter which the human mind, as free-floating will, acts upon (in Cascardi 1992: 36). Bauman regards modernity as an ideology which subordinated and de-animated nature and rendered it docile by turning it into mere raw material. The tendency to perceive the earth as mere repository of ores and 'natural resources' led to the compartmentalisation of nature into specialised spheres of exploitation, which denies or overrides holistic links between natural forces. In this orgy of instrumentalism, earth becomes ore, forest becomes timber and water is waste disposal (Bauman 1992: XI).

63). The rejection of the notion of a meaningful, divinely ordered natural world generated fears and anxieties about the consequences of 'natural' disorder. Cascardi claims that modern subjectivity is partly formulated in response to the above changes in the perception of nature. In Cartesian terms, nature is no longer regarded as a "firstness that is Being", but "as the site of the isolation and dissociation of individuals" (1992: 12).⁷⁴ Thus, Bauman states: "The aspects of human life now picked up for conscious regulation came to be known as 'culture'" (1992: 8). Kant emphasised the pivotal role played by culture in the realisation of human potential. Left to nature, man is nothing, but shaped by education and culture, human potential materialises in the form of the rational, emancipated subject (in Bauman 1991: 67-68).

Bocock (1992: 231-233) suggests that the numerous meanings the term 'culture' acquired during modernity are significant because it illustrates the term's gradual accrual of elitist value. Whereas it was initially simply used to denote the cultivation of crops, it attained new meaning in the 16th century when Bacon used to describe the educated human mind. In the 17th century Hobbes used it to refer to individuals, classes or nations that exhibited a high standard of civilisation. By the 18th century, Bocock continues, it had adopted distinct class overtones: 'culture' was something only the wealthy classes of Europe could aspire to. It represented the highest expression of the refinement of the cultivated elite, and manifested particularly in the arts.

Bauman insists that: "However the phenomenon of culture is defined, the possibility of the definition, of the very articulation of culture as a phenomenon of the world, is rooted in a particular vision of the world that articulates the potential, elaborates the values and legitimizes the role of the intellectuals" (1992: 3). He suggests that the notion of 'culture' implies that humans are essentially incomplete and that their humanisation is the product of interaction with other humans. A distinction is therefore made between an 'inherited insufficiency' and 'acquired completeness' which boils down to a dualistic opposition between the 'biological' and 'social' aspects of the divided human. In other words, there is a distinct difference between the natural and the nurtured human. Culture is thus a process of

⁷⁴ The withdrawal of an essential order from nature meant that, for Hobbes, nature was dispersed and fragmented and brutish (Cascardi 1992: 12). For this reason, Cascardi continues, the autonomy and self-assertion of the subject are bound to culture: that is, the ordered and ordering state (1992: 13).

humanisation whereby animal predispositions are tamed. The above conception of culture emphasises the requirement of teachers. Educators therefore hold the key to civilised society.⁷⁵

The articulation of social behaviour as learned signalled the birth of cultural ideology. Whereas, in the naturalistic pre-modern world, diversity or difference was regarded as part of the divine chain of being and therefore not to be tinkered with, difference now became man-made and therefore culpable. A model of universal perfection could now be contrived and enforced and undesirable cultures could (had to) make way for desirable ones (Bauman 1992: 3).

For Bauman (1992:9), the 'culture crusade' of the Enlightenment constituted a new vision of the social world as primarily constituted by the learning/teaching activity. Mythology, folk wisdom, proverbs and old wives tales were derided as 'wrong culture'. Men of knowledge performed the legislative function of determining the distinction between 'right' and 'wrong' culture and 'right culture' became the domain of an intellectual elite belonging to credible institutions: "The intellectual ideology of culture was launched as a militant, uncompromising and self-confident manifesto of universally binding principles of social organization and individual conduct."

Bocock (1992: 232) mentions that another significant meaning of the term 'culture' arose in the Enlightenment. In this understanding, the term came to denote a general, secular process of social development and represented the unilinear, historical self-development of humanity in which Europe occupied the forefront. 'Culture' thus stood for the example Europe presented to the rest of humanity. Bocock continues to elaborate further meanings of the term that arose in the late 19th and early 20th centuries – meanings that are often in tension with, or serve as displacements of the earlier meanings mentioned above.⁷⁶ He mentions in particular the meanings that the discipline of anthropology added to the term. These will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Despite changes to the understanding of the term 'culture' in the late 19th and 20th centuries, however, the core associations of elitism and Eurocentrism continued to inform colonial interpretations of African cultural products and, as I will demonstrate in this thesis, are still discernable in some art writings and practices today. I will also demonstrate how a tension

⁷⁵ Bauman further points out that this stress on education in the late 17th and early 18th centuries was accompanied by the institutionalisation of intellectuals (Bauman 1992: 2-3).

⁷⁶ Bocock singles out the inclusion of popular cultural forms under this label since the early 20th century, as a significant displacement of the elitist connotations acquired since the Enlightenment (1992: 232).

between nature and culture, particularly in the hermeneutic context of Africa, contributed significant ambiguities to art writing and art teaching practices in South Africa in the 20th century.

2.2.7 Modernism and race

An etymological review of the concept of 'race' reveals it as being equally as complex and changeable as the concept of 'culture'.⁷⁷ Given the complexity of this etymology and the many permutations and vast variety of racial theories during modernity, this discussion can touch on only the most common, influential and pervasive of these. For the purposes of this discussion, I focus mainly on Enlightenment conceptions of race, since these formed the foundation of the most persistent racial stereotypes of modernity.⁷⁸ In addition, they demonstrate the fundamental and pervasive ambivalence seated in the two conflictual economies of racial difference and universality – a fundamental conflict that, as I will show, underpins virtually all 20th-century interpretations of black art. Concepts of race of the 19th and 20th centuries, most of them under the influence of Darwinism, will be discussed in greater depth in Chapters 3 and 4, when I look at the influence of anthropology on the interpretation of African culture and at South African configurations of race in particular.

Foucault suggested that 'race' is a Western, early-modern invention, when the newly emerging social sciences came to formulate knowledge as a system of ordering and classifying according to visible and essential differences (Alcoff 2001: 267). In his incisive account of the history of ethnographic writing, Boon (1982: 33) proposes that: "In Enlightenment anthropology, measuring nonmeasurable things entailed charting human differences by analogy with natural differences, like species diversity." There developed in the Enlightenment a tendency to measure all differences (even moral ones) physically - a tendency which reached its peak in

⁷⁷ Reisigl & Wodak point out that the term 'race' was used only rarely before the 16th century, and was then primarily associated with aristocratic descent or membership of a specific dynasty or ruling house (2001: 373). They maintain that the term has belonged to different semantic fields at different times, but that it is only since the 18th century (in other words, since the 'scientific age') that it acquired pseudobiological and anthropological meanings that enabled it to be used to categorise people from all continents and countries according to (over)generalised phenotypic features. Well into the 20th century, the term 'race' was used quite loosely to refer to national groupings as well as human physiological 'types'. Dubow (1995: 24) mentions that, until the 1920s, the word 'race' was most frequently used in South Africa as synonym for 'nation', or to designate 'blood' (ie: the British versus the Afrikaner 'races'). As scientism increased in the first half of the 20th century, the term came to be used predominantly to refer to different human phenotypes, although its looser application is still occasionally heard today.

⁷⁸ According to Dubow (1995: 25) "the study of human difference is perhaps most sensibly traced back to the mid-eighteenth century, for it is with the development of the European Enlightenment that the main racial divisions of the world began to be firmly established".

the 19th century, with the development of the pseudo-sciences of craniology and phrenology.⁷⁹ Enlightenment anthropology was therefore vital in the modernist establishment of a uniformitarian materialism and standardised mechanisms in the measurement of human diversity and difference. Whereas human difference and variety was regarded, in pre-Enlightenment Europe, as a lapse from an originary biblical unity and oneness, the Enlightenment conception of cultural variety and extremes always entailed, Boon points out, measuring from a neutral analytic locus (a universal norm) that was provided, needless to say, by the West. Boon thus demonstrates that a clear dichotomy between the European and the exotic was not formulated until the establishment of Enlightenment secularism (1982: 34).⁸⁰

West insists that any attempt to account for the emergence of race in the modern era must depart from the premise that race (and by extension white supremacy) has been encoded in the very structure of modern discourse since the Enlightenment: "... the very structure of modern discourse *at its inception* produced forms of rationality, scientificity, and objectivity as well as aesthetic and cultural ideals which require the constitution of the idea of white supremacy" [author's italics] (2002: 90). Race may thus be seen as a logic endemic to the very structure of the modernist episteme. It is implicit in the entire epistemological field of modernist discourse, in its controlling metaphors and in its categories and descriptions. The Enlightenment's epistemological field is premised on discursive exclusion which 'secretes' the idea of white supremacy. Racism may thus be regarded as a "particular logical consequence of the quest for truth and knowledge in the modern West" (2002: 91). The quest to categorically order the known world thus necessitated the invention of race.

Alcoff points out that the early modern concern with classification based on visible difference clashed with an emerging liberal ideology espousing universalism. This resulted in contradictory

⁷⁹ The application of natural history techniques to the study of human species yielded a comparative analysis "based on visible, especially physical characteristics ... [which] permit one to discern identity and difference, equality and inequality, beauty and ugliness among animals and human bodies" (West in Alcoff 2001: 268). West also points out that "the authority of science, undergirded by a modern philosophical discourse guided by Greek ocular metaphors and Cartesian notions, promotes and encourages the activities of observing, comparing, measuring, and ordering the physical characteristics of human bodies" (2002: 91). The ideal against which physical difference was measured, was supplied by antique classical sculpture - which was felt to embody the aesthetic values of beauty, proportion, harmony and moderation. West insists that the influence of these classical ideals must not be underestimated since they were productive of, and continued to authorise, the West's 'normative gaze' (2002: 99). Alcoff points out that the emphasis on visual differences (as 'sign' of essential, deeper seated differences) is a typical by-product of secular, commodity-driven societies: "In such a context, visible differences operate as powerful determinants over social interaction" (2001: 268).

⁸⁰ Alcoff (2001: 267-267) suggests that race-making is closely related to map-making, since the mapping of new geographical terrains were given intelligibility partly through association with racial phenotypes: "The ordering and labelling of natural terrain, the classifying of natural types, and the typologies of 'natural races' thus emerged simultaneously and were no doubt motivated by European anxiety about the suddenly increased size and diversity of their world."

accounts of race in which classification systems tried to accommodate differences in ranking systems organised by a single logic which served to nullify relativism and protect universalism (2001: 268). Thus universalist narratives and the detailed taxonomies of difference remains one of the greatest antinomies of modernism. For Bhabha, this contradiction results in the paradox of the overarticulation and simultaneous elision of difference and serves as primary source of ambivalence in modernist discourse and practice.

In his reader *Race and the Enlightenment*, Eze (2000) argues conclusively that race was a central concept in the earliest formulations of modernist discourse.⁸¹ Eze points out that Enlightenment thinking about race can be traced to ancient Greek distinctions between 'cultured' and 'barbaric' peoples, where the principle of reason determined the distinction between the two dual opposites. He concludes that "the Enlightenment's declaration of itself as 'the Age of Reason' was predicated upon precisely the assumption that reason could historically only come to maturity in modern Europe" (2000: 4). Eze (2000: 5) ascribes the hierarchical character of race theories in the Enlightenment to the lingering effects of the medieval biblical concept of a Great Chain of Being, in which all things have their 'proper' place. Although science had overthrown this religious world-view, nature continued to be conceptualised as a hierarchical system in which every living being had a 'naturally' assigned place and status:

At the top of the human chain in this general schema was positioned the European, while non-Europeans were positioned at lower points on the scale of a supposed human, rational and moral, evolutionary capacity.⁸²

Dubow (1995: 20) supports this contention by pointing out that a persistent medieval conception of the Great Chain of Being motivated the search for the 'lower' limits of humanity at least a hundred years before Darwin's theory of evolution was published.⁸³

⁸¹ Eze notes a tendency among scholars to dismiss Enlightenment discourses around race as marginal and non-critical to the formulation of an Enlightenment philosophy and subjectivity. He points out, for instance, that general studies of Kant rarely mention that he devoted the bulk of his career to the writing and teaching of theories on race, cross-cultural anthropology and physical geography (2000: 2). Eze provides very convincing arguments why questions of race and of the biological, geographical and cultural distribution of humans across the globe should be seen as crucial to the Enlightenment formulation of 'general' theories of society, culture and subjectivity.

⁸² This can be seen very clearly in the first 'scientific' classification system of the Enlightenment devised by Carl von Linné (Linnaeus) who insisted that his classifications were simply revealing of the God-given 'order of nature'. Linnaeus divided the order of *Homo sapiens* into 6 categories – the four-footed Wild Man (the inclusion of which demonstrates a lingering medieval belief in these mythical creatures); the American races; the European races, the oriental races and the black races. He finally also included *Monstrosus*, among which he lists the Hottentot. The qualities – mental, physical, emotional and behavioural – assigned to these categories presented the 'European races' in a very flattering light (as gentle, acute and inventive and governed by law), while the 'black races' are described as "crafty, indolent, negligent ... and governed by caprice" (in Eze 2000: 10 – 13).

While Enlightenment thinking about race was very varied and often conflicting (as Eze's balanced selection of writings aims to illustrate), it is nonetheless evident that (to use his terms) the Enlightenment's climate of 'intellectual cross- or in-breeding' generated certain identifiable scientific and philosophical vocabularies that remain reasonably consistent throughout these texts. Thus certain relatively uniform conceptions of 'race', 'nature', 'progress', 'civilisation' and 'savagery' identify these theories, regardless of differences, as belonging to the same 'universe of discourse' or episteme (Eze 2000: 7).⁸⁴

There were numerous debates in the 18th century around the question of common versus multiple origins for all of humanity. While most writers expounded monogenetic theories, numerous polygenetic theories were also proposed. This debate is indicative of a growing concern with the two fundamentally opposing constructs of difference and universality. Leclerc, for instance, insisted on a general origin for all humans, and ascribed the differences between the races primarily to climate (in Eze 2000: 15–28). Despite this propounding of a universal humanity, however, Leclerc confidently distinguished between the 'savage' and the 'civilized' races, praising the "gentleness, humanity and venerable example" of the missionaries in curbing "the natural ferocity and stubbornness" of the savages (in Eze 2000: 20).

In distinguishing between races most Enlightenment writers were particularly concerned with the question of skin colour as the most visible sign of difference, and as the most convincing argument for the climatic origins of racial variation.⁸⁵ This preoccupation with the skin colour remained characteristic of modernist discourses on race.

⁸³ This 'lowest limit' was provided, Dubow claims, by the 'Hottentots', the 'bushmen' and the Australian Aborigines (1995: 21).

⁸⁴ Eze points out that all these writings rely extensively on accounts of travellers and explorers, whose information is taken at face value. The result is that Enlightenment theories of race perpetuate many medieval myths about monstra with, for instance, rudimentary tails, or with heads sunken into their chests (2000: 5). Hence Swift's contemporary poem about "Geographers in Afric-maps, With savage Pictures fill their gaps (in Comaroff 2001: 48).

⁸⁵ Kant's writings, for instance, attempt to find 'rational' and 'scientific' explanations for gradations in skin colour. Kant's account of differences between skin types is that black bile is the cause of Africans' dark skins (in Eze 2000: 61). In the entry on 'negroes' in Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, the bulk of the discussion is devoted to an evaluation of theories about the African's 'blackness'. They propose, like Kant, that the darkness of the African skin must be ascribed to the presence of black bile and fluids (2000: 91-92). Winthrop (1982: 44) points out that **even** before substantial contact between Europeans and Africans, the term black had associations (according to the Oxford English Dictionary) with "deeply stained dirt; soiled; dirty, foul ... Having dark or deadly purposes, malignant; pertaining to or involving death; baneful, disastrous, sinister ... Foul, iniquitous, atrocious, horrible, wicked".

Despite differences in Enlightenment conceptions of race, the superiority of the 'European race' was, with a few exceptions, virtually taken for granted – the negative stereotype of the Other amounted to a narcissistic self-portrait. Hume, for instance, in his *Of National Characters*, suspected "all other species of men ... to be naturally inferior to the whites" (in Eze 2000: 29),⁸⁶ and Cuvier confidently proclaimed that "the race from which we are descended has been called Caucasian ... the handsomest on earth" (in Eze 2000: 104). Kant and Hegel similarly expounded the superiority of the Europeans over all other cultural and racial groups. Non-European people were almost uniformly described in negative terms. Kant proclaimed apropos an encounter with an African that "this fellow was quite black ... a clear proof that what he said was stupid" (in Eze 2000: 38), while the *Encyclopedia Britannica* of 1798 stereotyped the 'Negro' as follows: "Vices of the most notorious seem to be the portion of this unhappy race: idleness, treachery, revenge, cruelty, impudence, stealing, lying, profanity, debauchery, nastiness and intemperance" (in Eze 2000: 94).

According to Eze, Kant and Hegel played major roles in the formulation of modernist concepts of race. Eze devotes the bulk of the reader to Kant's writings and rounds off his reader with an extract from Hegel's "Lectures on the Philosophy of World History" even though Hegel wrote this well into the 19th century. For Eze, Hegel deserves inclusion since he synthesised the philosophical and 'scientific' perspectives of his Enlightenment predecessors (in Eze 2000: 7). In "Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime", Kant argues that aesthetic and moral sensibility (a sense of the beautiful and the sublime) varies from nation to nation. Predictably he regards the German as supreme in this regard, and the African as possessing "no [aesthetic or sublime] feeling beyond the trifling" (in Eze 2000: 49).⁸⁷ Kant's writings about national and racial characteristics present them as innate, immutable and essential, which stands in ambiguous relation to his repeated emphasis, elsewhere, on education and the cultivation of the rational faculty as a universal means of promoting human progress. This assumption of national and racial 'essences' continued to inform interpretations and evaluations of culture throughout modernity, and remains an indication of a conflictual economy at work between the Enlightenment avocation of education as redeeming force and such deterministic

⁸⁶ In order to demonstrate that there was opposition to this notion in the Enlightenment, Eze publishes an extract from an objection to Hume's supposition by Beattie, who objects to the arrogance and ignorance of Hume's judgement (2000: 34 – 37). Johann Gottfried von Herder also disputed Kant's claim to European superiority and propagated cultural pluralism instead (in Eze 2000: 71-78).

⁸⁷ It is almost amusing to read with which consistency Kant ascribes the most superior qualities to the Germans. In his 'Physical Geography', for instance, he asserts that "the tallest and most beautiful people ... are on the parallel ... which runs through Germany" (in Eze 2000: 58). This of course confirms the postcolonial observation that the negative 'portrait' of the Other in modernity is not much more than a narcissistic self-portrait.

conceptions of national and race characteristics. This modernist discursive tendency will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 4.

As I have pointed out previously, most Enlightenment scholars believed that all human societies were engaged in a universal (but unequal) process of growth and progressive improvement. Kant, for instance, sought to locate the inherent human rational capacity responsible for historical progress from the primitive to the civilised (in Eze 2000: 65).⁸⁸ In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, Hegel proposes that Africans must be considered as less human than Europeans because they are not aware of themselves as conscious, historical beings (in Eze 2000: 109). He suggests that the African: “has not yet reached an awareness of any substantial and objective existence” and as such has not yet attained recognition of the universal, or of any “substantial objectivity” (in Eze 2000: 127). This inability to progress beyond their immediate existence causes Africans to perpetrate “the most unthinking inhumanity and revolting barbarity” and therefore, Hegel concludes, there can be no African subjectivity, but “merely a series of subjects who destroy one another” (in Eze 2000: 126).⁸⁹ The African’s imbeddedness in nature is not so much a state of innocence as one of animality, for nature is fundamentally unfree and freedom is a matter of human will (in Eze 2000: 128). Africa therefore remains “the land of childhood, removed from the light of self-conscious history and wrapped in the dark mantle of night” and thus “has no historical interest of its own, for we find its inhabitants living in barbarism and savagery in a land which has not furnished them with any integral ingredient of culture” (in Eze 2000: 124).

The aporia that exists between the humanist desire to recognise the human race as a universal family, and the equally pressing imperative to create distance and difference (in order to reify European superiority), emerges very clearly in Hegel’s writing: “The African, in his undifferentiated and concentrated unity, has not yet succeeded in making this distinction between himself as an individual and his essential universality” (in Eze 2000: 127). Hegel thus

⁸⁸ Blumenbach, however, proposed a theory of the degeneration of races which contradicted the usual progressivist theories by suggesting that all races other than European were degenerated from an original ‘ideal’ stock represented by Europeans (in Eze 2000: 79-90). Diderot’s and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*, on the other hand, suggested that Africans appear to constitute an entirely separate (ugly and wicked) species of mankind (2000: 91-92).

⁸⁹ Hegel ascribes the African’s lack of subjectivity to Africa’s purported geographical and historical isolation: “Generally speaking, Africa is a continent enclosed within itself, and this enclosedness has remained its chief characteristic” (in Eze 2000: 122). He also ascribes the ‘backwardness’ of the African to climatic conditions. The African has not “progressed beyond his immediate existence” because the torrid climate encouraged sensuality and thus prevented his liberation from nature (in Eze 2000: 112). Hegel perceives liberation from nature as a primary condition “of all higher spiritual culture” and concludes that it is therefore “the temperate zone [Europe] which must furnish the theatre of world history” (in Eze 2000: 112).

describes the “universal spirit and form of the African character” as “totally different from our own” (in Eze 2000: 126). Hegel’s proposition that Africans are less than human serves to justify colonialism and slavery: “Slavery is unjust in and of itself, for the essence of man is freedom; but he must first become mature before he can be free” (in Eze 2000: 135). Slavery is thus regarded as a necessary stage in the moral education of the African, and “the civilized nation is conscious that the rights of the barbarians are unequal to its own” (in Eze 2000: 149).⁹⁰

From approximately 1800 onwards, racial discourses were characterised by typological thinking which aimed at establishing the essential differences between ‘savage’ and ‘civilised’ human types: “Typological thinking was intrinsically static. It was based on arbitrary ideal categories which privileged difference and diversity over similarity and convergence” (Dubow 1995: 26). Typological theory is defined by Dubow (after Banton) as

the idea that variations in the constitution and behaviour of individuals reflect differences between underlying types which remain relatively permanent; the view that social categories can be broadly correlated with natural categories; and the belief that an innate antagonism exists between individuals of one type and those of another (1995: 26).

New racial debates and theories were formulated with obsessional frenzy in the 19th century, particularly after Darwin’s revolutionary theory of evolution reactivated interest and proposed new elaborations. By the second half of the 19th century, Reisigl and Wodak (2001: 7) claim, the concept of ‘race’ became a commonly used term for the first time outside the natural sciences. What distinguished 19th-century concepts of race, was the legitimation offered by ‘science’: one of the most influential race theories was formulated by the Comte de Gobineau in a four volume treatise called *On the Inequality of Human Races* (1835-55) in which ‘scientific evidence’ was provided to finally and incontrovertibly ‘prove’ European racial superiority. The French anatomist, Cuvier, also contributed significantly towards the development of 19th-century race theory and presented strong arguments in favour of physical differences as the foundation of cultural differences.⁹¹

Under the influence of social Darwinism, late 19th-century theorists of race “interpreted history as a ‘racial struggle’ within which only the fittest ‘races’ would have the right to survive” (Reisigl

⁹⁰ Hegel also regards the colonising activity as a sign of a mature civil society (in Eze 2000: 152).

⁹¹ Cuvier’s views of ‘pure’ races which could be ordered hierarchically from superior to inferior influenced subsequent definitive race theories such as Hamilton Smith’s *The Natural History of the Human Species* (published in 1848) and Knox’s *The Races of Man* (published in 1850) and Nott and Gliddon’s *Types of Mankind* (published in 1854) (Husband 1982: 13-14).

& Wodak 2001: 8).⁹² Dubow (1995: 14) points out that biological racism flourished in the buoyant optimism of the late 19th and early 20th century.⁹³ He proposes that “[t]he creed of biological racism can be seen as one important variant of [the] naive faith in the dispassionate virtue and transforming power of positivist science”. Science increasingly came to be validated as the locus of Western material and cultural authority, and was regarded as essential to the very definition of modernity and civilisation.⁹⁴ The conflation of race and culture was exacerbated by the conflation of nationalism and culture; and together they determined the intellectual foundations of an emerging racial anthropology:

The notion of culture as an expression of race and nationality is in part a product of post-Enlightenment European thought. When combined with 19th century evolutionist ideas and applied to the determination of human difference, the foundations for the emergence of racial anthropology were set firmly in place (Dubow 1995: 20).

The institutionalisation of anthropology in the second half of the 19th century strengthened and solidified the conception of races as displaying national and phenotypic characteristics. Knox’ race theories, in particular, promoted a racial determinism that ‘proved’ that character (national and individual) “is traceable solely to the nature of that race to which the individual or nation belongs” (Dubow 1995: 27).

It is generally agreed that World War 2 occasioned a major shift in race thinking (Dubow 1995; Husband 1982). The mood of anti-fascism that prevailed during and after the war gave rise to sustained critiques of racial superiority, and social and cultural anthropologists such as Kuper increasingly questioned the correlation between race and culture. This scepticism formed part of a wave of modernity critique that followed in the wake of the Nazi holocaust. Most

⁹² Husband (1982: 14) points out that Darwinian evolutionism significantly displaced the rather simple 18th-century and early 19th-century conception of races as pure and immutable types. Darwin’s *Origins of the Species* (published in 1859) had profound implications as regards the development of racist ideologies, since it proposed the possibility of change within and between the races which, in turn, raised the spectre of the contamination and degeneration of the ‘superior races’. In the second half of the 19th century, organisations such as the Eugenics Movement agitated for state controls to be instituted to ensure ‘racial hygiene’: “The imperative for planned racial development emerged as a central tenet of the school of thought that became known as Social Darwinism” (Husband 1982: 14).

⁹³ In the 20th century this evolutionist perspective reached its peak in programmes of ‘ethnic cleansing’ and eugenics (and, of course, in the system of Apartheid), where it was often used in conjunction with terms such as ‘nation’ or ‘Volk’.

⁹⁴ Despite the growing influence of biological racism in the 19th century, physical anthropology only gained momentum after World War 1, when discoveries in palaeo-anthropology re-ignited interest in the origins and diversification of modern humans. Increasingly the evolutionary model of a unilinear progressive process of universal human development was supplanted by a multilinear model which argued for different racial lineages and stocks. Inter alia, these debates raised the possibility of evolutionary retrogression (most often applied to the ‘degenerate bushmen’) (Dubow 1995: 39-53).

sociological, philosophical and anthropological theories directly after the war stressed the essential unity of mankind and brought physical anthropology and biological determinism into disrepute. Post-war biological anthropology abandoned the obsession with classification and taxonomy (which Dubow refers to as 'splitting') in favour of 'lumping' – a process whereby similarities rather than differences are stressed (Dubow 1995: 58-59).

The radical questioning of modernity and its attendant race discourses after World War 2 did not, however, herald the end of racism. It is often postulated that the 'post-modern' celebration of plurality and difference is not the overcoming of modernist notions of racial superiority, but a global neo-liberal economic strategy to pretend a level playing field where none exists. A number of authors have commented on the disturbing evidence, moreover, of a resurgence of biological racism since the 1970s – a resurgence, some fear, that may gain impetus from recent developments in genetic science.

While few South African art writings make direct reference to race theories, it is manifestly clear, as will be demonstrated in Chapter 4, that the numerous race discourses listed above deposited themselves as often conflicting sediments in various authors' approaches to modern black art. The simultaneous overarticulation of universalism and difference is particularly pervasive in these art writings; and the evolutionist assumptions of much modern race theorising are likewise clearly discernable. In particular, race theories impact on how the modern black subject is represented.

The above critical summary of modernity as discursive paradigm aimed to provide a scopic, but hopefully not over-reductive, account of the main tenets and characteristics of the modernist episteme, while simultaneously isolating and highlighting those aspects of modernist discursive practice that demonstrably underpinned 20th-century South African art writing on 'modern' black artistic practice. In the next chapter, I pursue modernist/colonial discourse into the 19th and early 20th centuries, where I explore their manifestation in anthropological and art theoretical writings on African art.

CHAPTER 3

PERSPECTIVES ON AFRICAN MATERIAL CULTURE

Global, historical, political, social, communal, personal, and psychological values are simultaneously implicated in the issues which cluster around our versions of the primitive. Psychologists and imperialists, socialists and capitalists, liberals and fascists share the same assumptions, lie together in the same bed (Torgovnick 1990: 17).

Postcolonial theorists propose that the primary role of modernist discourse was to entrench and legitimate Western imperialism. Colonial discourses are therefore particularly revealing of the modernist episteme. Clearly evident in the colonial discourses of the 19th and 20th century, are the modernist concern with order and taxonomic classification; the establishment of a totalising world picture arranged within a universal trajectory of linear time; a preoccupation with race and alterity; and an overarching belief in the triumph of reason as manifested in an increasingly scientific worldview. In this chapter, I focus on the 19th and early 20th century Western reception of African material culture as prime examples of colonial discourse.⁹⁵ I contend that these writings, despite their considerable disciplinary diversity and often substantial conflicts between their numerous approaches and theories, display a range of 'typical' modernist discursive characteristics - characteristics that continued to inform South African art writing on modern black cultural production well into the 1990s and even beyond, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter.

In *Reinventing Africa*, Coombes (1994: 2) cautions against an oversimplified picture of colonial perceptions of Africa and African cultures. This caricatural picture paints colonial discourse as uniformly productive of Africa as a 'land of darkness' peopled with savages that produce only curiosities and fetishes. Coombes suggests that in fact much that was written about African material culture emanated from philanthropic and humanitarian liberals who opposed the colonial project.⁹⁶ She adds that, even in the public sphere, flexible and sometimes contradictory ideas held sway:

⁹⁵ I include writings of the 'postcolonial' era under this designation since, as I will demonstrate, ethnography by and large remained rooted in colonial precepts well after the decolonisation of Africa.

⁹⁶ James (1975: 42) suggests that it is in the nature of a discipline such as anthropology to accommodate liberal views: "[T]he very existence of social anthropology in the colonial period constituted a source of potential radical criticism of the colonial order itself. The occurrence of liberal views within the subject was therefore not an accident; it was entailed by the nature of anthropological research, which by definition reaches out geographically, linguistically and philosophically beyond the bounds of received Western civilization...". Feuchtwang confirms this humanitarian origin of anthropology in his history of early British anthropology. He

The Africa that existed in the popular imagination was an ideological space, at once savage, threatening, exotic and productive, inhabited by a population assigned a similarly disparate and ultimately contradictory range of racial traits. Representations of the African were, and are, evidently not 'fixed' but eminently recuperable and variable, depending on the political exigencies of any specific historical conjuncture (1994: 2).

Despite the heterogeneity and ambiguity of colonial responses to 'primitive' art, it can be argued that prevailing assumptions and preconceptions regarding both Western and African culture can be uncovered within these texts. 'Primitive art', Errington (1998: 269) points out, "stood as the emblem of the Other" and, as Mudimbe (1994: 55) argues, "so-called primitive art, seems best to reflect in contemporary consciousness the idea of Africa". He also cautions us that "what is called African art covers a wide range of objects introduced into a historicising perspective of European values since the 18th century" (1986:3). African art studies thus often tell us more about Western ideas, definitions and classifications than it informs us about African art.

In the following discussion, I suggest that, within the matrix of modern Western presuppositions about race and culture, the concept 'primitive art' constitutes an oxymoron that creates a pervasive ambiguity in colonial writing about the cultural products of non-Western peoples. This ambiguity is exacerbated by the fact that these writings conjoin the often contradictory grand narratives of anthropology and art history into one discourse. The implications of the oxymoron become particularly pronounced when the 'primitive' artist produces 'modern art', as I will demonstrate in this and the next chapter.

3.1 PRIMITIVISM AND THE NOTION OF 'THE PRIMITIVE'

In the 19th and 20th centuries the term 'primitive' was used in cultural and social discourse to define people with limited mechanical and technical knowledge (societies with tools but not machines); peoples who had not developed writing; and classless societies (Price 1989a: 2). The term 'primitive art' was therefore used to describe the cultural products of the peoples of

suggests that pre-World War 2 anthropology developed out of humanitarian reform movements (such as the Royal Anthropological Institute which developed out of the Aborigines Protection Society) and suggests that their main objective of study was to establish the unity of man (1975: 80). This liberal project was undercut, however, as I will demonstrate later, by an equally prominent early anthropological quest to uncover the essential differences between 'modern' and 'primitive' societies.

Africa, Oceania and parts of Asia.⁹⁷ The unquestioned use of the term suggests to what extent the discourse of the 'primitive' formed a naturalised and essential part of the modernist episteme. Errington suggests that the notion of the primitive was necessitated by the metanarrative of progress (1998: 5). To put it simply: 'the primitive' had to be invented because progressive development required a point of origin. As discussed in the previous chapter, Europe's modernity could only be measured against a spatially and temporally distant 'primitive' other. The 'primitive' is thus indispensable as the fulcrum around which the 'civilised' is constructed. The 'primitive' art object exerted fascination as the most concrete and material sign of originary 'primitive Otherness' in the European imaginary.

Although, as I have repeatedly demonstrated, the 'primitive' was always an ambiguous concept, the stock rhetoric surrounding it in the 18th and 19th centuries was overwhelmingly saturated with connotations of fear, base eroticism and savage darkness. The African art object (described as 'idols' or 'fetishes') was commonly perceived as the axis of satanic evil.⁹⁸ In the early 20th century this debased stereotype made way for a more pronounced ambiguity in the values circulating around the term. The Modernist Primitivists' celebration of the 'primitive' as a state of delirious freedom from the stifling constraints of modernity articulated a growing dissatisfaction with the increasingly industrialised modern life-world.⁹⁹ Goldwater defines primitivism as the belief that under the surface complexities of modern existence deep and simple essences reside that hearken back to humankind's originary state (1962: 271). Primitivism implies a perception of 'civilisation' as a fall from grace - the celebration of the 'primitive' amounted to a critique of the stultifying repressive effects of modernity.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ The term fell into disrepute and its unqualified use was gradually curtailed only after the controversial *Primitivism and Modern Art* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1984. But Janson's 1986 edition of *History of Art*, while acknowledging that "'Primitive' is a somewhat unfortunate word" nonetheless insists that "no other single term will serve us better. Let us continue, then to use primitive as a convenient label for a way of life that has passed through the Neolithic revolution, but shows no signs of evolving in the direction of 'historic' civilizations" (quoted in Price 1989: 1).

⁹⁸ Oguibe (2002: 245) quotes the reverend Glover (of the Catholic mission, western Nigeria), who described African sculpture as "the wretched, irritating and grotesque woods ... that dim the light of faith".

⁹⁹ Primitivism is therefore a significant indicator of modern European presuppositions about non-European societies. The 20th century saw the waning of the optimistic vision of continuous and unlimited progress in favour of an outlook that became increasingly sceptical of the Enlightenment project. This dystopian vision of modernity was accompanied by the idealisation of 'the primitive'. Although a paradisiacal idealisation of pre-modern societies has occurred since the Enlightenment, the utopian vision of the world of the 'primitive' as prelapsarian paradise acquired new momentum in the 20th century as travel and tourism actively promoted such dreams. Simultaneously, a discourse of the irredeemably savage 'primitive' continued to be disseminated in order to justify and fuel the colonial scramble for Africa.

¹⁰⁰ Fabian suggests that this tendency - to posit the 'authenticity' of a past age in order to denounce the 'inauthenticity' of the present age - developed in the Enlightenment, but was already prefigured in the Judeo-Christian tradition (1983: 10).

Freud's theories of the unconscious gave impetus to the primitivist 'movement' in art and literature - under his influence 'primitive' art came to signify freedom from rational control and repressive civilisation.¹⁰¹ To dabble in 'the primitive' was akin to exploring the unconscious. Hence 'the primitive' provided not merely a conduit into the fresh and unspoilt vision of prelapsarian Adam and Eve, but was also a flirtation with the 'dark side' of human nature¹⁰² – in Picasso's *Demoiselles D'Avignon*, for instance, 'the primitive' becomes (or is interpreted as) a carrier of disease, corruption and death.¹⁰³

To Jung, Africa represented the quintessential locus of the primitive, which constituted the terrain of the universal unconscious and hence the "immemorially known".¹⁰⁴ The quest of the 20th-century structuralists to uncover the universal truth about human nature lent academic credence to this view, since authors such as Ellis and Frazer regarded 'primitive' societies, with their 'simple' and 'primal' structures, as the key to universal truths about man's innate being that have been obscured by the complexities of an unnatural modern existence.¹⁰⁵ The projective identification with 'the primitive' as a mirror of a lost, unitary humanity meant that it was used as repository for all the contents of the Western untamed unconscious.¹⁰⁶ The extraordinary mobility and durability of these conceptions of the essential nature of 'the primitive' enabled it to be used, Torgovnick points out, in the discourse of rightists to justify fascism (blood, folk, fertility), and by leftists to mobilise for classless, anti-technological and communal societies.

¹⁰¹ In *Gone Primitive* Torgovnick (1990) provides a very insightful reading of Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*. Torgovnick proposes that Freud's theories facilitated a reading of 'the primitive' as the locus of violence, sex and death (such as in, for instance, the writings of the ethnographer Leiris).

¹⁰² The axiom that the pursuit of the 'primitive' was both a flirtation with the dark side and a spiritual journey in search of lost origins, is clearly articulated by the Modernist poet Apollinaire, one of the earliest collectors of Oceanic and African art: "You are walking back to Auteuil, going home on foot, Soon to be asleep among your fetishes from Guinea and the South Seas. They are Christs in another shape, of another creed, they are the inferior Christs of our own dark hopes" (in McNamara 1982: 2).

¹⁰³ In *New Encounters with Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* Chave (2002: 272) argues that interpretations of this painting – perhaps more than the painting itself – perpetrate "all the scathing stereotypes that have so long dogged dark-skinned peoples". For another very lucid account of the ambivalent anticolonialism of primitivism as it manifests in Picasso's work, see Leighton, P *The white Peril and L'Art nègre* (2002).

¹⁰⁴ These presuppositions about 'the primitive' remained dominant until the 1980s. To provide but one example: in his book *Primitive Art* (1962) Wingert dissociates himself from the evolutionist connotations of the term, but emphatically underscores the discourse of a universal 'simple' human essence underlying the 'primitive': "[the term 'primitive' is used] not because they [the 'primitives'] represent the fumbling, early beginnings of civilization; rather, it is because these cultures show developments more closely allied to the fundamental, basic, and essential drives of life that have not been buried under a multitude of parasitical, non-essential desire".

¹⁰⁵ Even the functionalist (and thus anti-evolutionist) anthropologist Malinowsky pronounced that: "The primitive mind is the human mind as we find it universally" (Torgovnick 1990: 7).

¹⁰⁶ 'Primitives' were free, mystic, at one with nature; but also dangerous, irrational and uncontrollably libidinous. Any debate about the nature of 'primitive societies' boiled down to a debate about human nature: "Ethnographers like Malinowski debated whether primitive societies were naturally 'communitic' and 'promiscuous' or 'individualistic' and 'monogamous'" (Torgovnick 1990: 9).

Hence Torgovnick proclaims that: “The primitive does what we ask it to do. Voiceless, it lets us speak for it” (1990: 9).¹⁰⁷

Although the term ‘primitive’ (and its evolutionist implications) has fallen into disrepute in academic discourse, it is alive and well in popular discourse and flourishes in the public imaginary, as Torgovnick and Price have shown in their respective publications on contemporary primitivism.¹⁰⁸ Here it is accompanied by various associated metaphors and figures, such as the trope of the ‘jungle’, which is used, Torgovnick points out, even to refer to populations who populate the grassy plains of Africa (1990: 20).

Despite the discreditation of its stock vocabularies (savage/civilised etc), the dialectic of the modern and the primitive continues unabated in academic discourse. The tendency is to simply replace the binary of ‘primitive/civilised’ with more neutral euphemisms (such as traditional/modern etc) - Fagg, for instance, simply replaces ‘primitive’ with ‘tribal’.¹⁰⁹ Commenting on this tendency, Errington reminds us that “the real need is not for neutralized substitutes but for recognition that the term does not describe a Yoruba figure or an Egyptian relief, but a set of ideas belonging to Europeans” (1998: xxvi). In similar vein, Fabian cautions that ‘*Primitive* being essentially a temporal concept, is a category, not an object, of Western thought’ (1983: 18). In Chapter 4, I will demonstrate that the notion of ‘the primitive’ continued to underpin a significant body of writing on ‘modern black art’.

3.2 THE MIGRATION OF THE ‘PRIMITIVE’ ART OBJECT

From the 18th to the 20th century, the African art object migrated from value sphere to value sphere. The successive textual and institutional transformation of the African art object - first as curiosity, then as ethnographic specimen and finally as work of art – demonstrates, as Torgovnick (1990) makes clear in *Gone Primitive*, the degree to which continually changing Western standards control and bestow value, but also paradoxically illustrates the astounding continuity of certain pervasive tropes and ambiguities in the conception of ‘the primitive’. The fact that ‘primitive art’ migrated from location to location in the modern art-culture system

¹⁰⁷ An example of this ‘projective identification’ is provided by the early 20th-century ethnologist Leo Frobenius, who proposed a connection between the German (which he calls the Faustian) and the African soul as both sharing “the oldest simplest ties with nature, a return to naturalness” (in Goldwater 1962: 43).

¹⁰⁸ Torgovnick’s *Primitive Passions* (1996), for instance, explores post-modern primitivism (which she calls Neo-Primitivism) as an offshoot of earlier primitivist ideas and myths.

¹⁰⁹ The hiatus caused by the unacceptability of the term ‘primitive’ after the 1984 exhibition *Primitivism and Modern Art* caused serious taxonomic problems for students of African art, as is evinced by the fact that an entire issue of African Arts was devoted to terminology in 1987.

indicates, above all, the hermeneutical problem presented to the West by the material presence of 'primitive culture'. Since, as discussed in the previous chapter, modernist discourse regarded 'the primitive' as synonymous with the realm of nature, and culture as the highest aspirations of developed and civilised societies, the mere physical presence of 'primitive art' constituted an anomaly and a paradox.

The collection and display of 'primitive art' is of particular importance, since these practices not only reflected but also largely aided in determining and fixing current European perceptions of 'primitive' cultures. A detailed survey of collection practices, with their attendant economic and critical implications, cannot be attempted in this thesis and would constitute an unnecessary divergence from my main argument.¹¹⁰ Nonetheless, it is impossible to separate the critical and textual reception of the African material object from its collection and spatial designation, as Preziosi makes clear (1998: 16):

From the sequential juxtaposition of objects in museum space to the formatting of photo or slide collections ... to the curricular composition of university departments, disciplinary practice has been characteristically motivated by a desire to construe the significance of works as a function of their relative position in an unfolding historical-genealogical scheme of development, evolution, progress, or accountable change.

The various institutional (and private) spaces allocated to African material culture at different times by different disciplines demonstrate not only the spatial, but also the temporal Othering of 'primitive' cultures in the modern West and thus need to be considered briefly.¹¹¹

The Western collection of material culture from Africa started with the earliest European contact with the continent in the mid 15th century. Until the 18th century, these 'exotic objects' were kept in private *wunderkammers* (cabinets of curiosities) where, along with specimens of

¹¹⁰ Since the linguistic turn much has been written that relocates interest from the African art object proper to its textual and institutional reception and interpretation by the West. See, for instance, Price (1989), Coombes (1994), Torgovnick (1990, 1996), Phillips & Steiner (1999), Clifford (1988, 1994), Errington (1988), and Steiner (1994).

¹¹¹ Although I attempt a roughly linear historical tracing of collection and display practices in order to reveal successive paradigms in the perception/reception of the African art object, it should be kept in mind that these 'phases' were not clearly delineated and that lingering traces of earlier paradigms can be discerned in later phases. So, for instance, the early European voyagers' sensationalistic and voyeuristic wonderment at the 'exoticism' and 'dark horrors' of 'primitive fetishes' continued to inform popular perceptions of African material culture throughout the 'scientific age', and remain chillingly persistent today. Certainly traces of this sensationalism can be discerned in late 20th-century South African art writing about modern black artistic practice - as will be demonstrated in the next chapter. Similarly, despite more than a century of attempts to dislodge it, the evolutionary paradigm continues to underpin museum and tourist displays into the 21st century.

fauna and flora, they stood as emblems of unknown and marginal worlds.¹¹² These objects were not regarded as of scientific interest, but as signs of the exotic and were thus valued, Steiner suggests, largely as “icons of conquest attesting to unbridled Western power in the age of Discovery” (1994: 108).¹¹³

In the 18th and early 19th centuries, attempts were made to find a place for ‘primitive art’ in a growing system of modern knowledge. In *Collecting Art and Culture* (1994: 150), Clifford points out that collecting increasingly became the domain of scientific naturalists and that more and more serious attempts were made to devise taxonomies for cultural products and to keep records of their site of origin. The re-evaluation of ‘primitive art’ as object of ethnographic interest necessitated their relocation from the private *wunderkammers* of gentlemen collectors to the public sphere of the natural history museum. The growth of the scientific paradigm can be measured by the astonishingly rapid establishment of numerous natural history and ethnographic museums in the second half of the 19th century, where, at first slowly and then with increasing momentum, cultural objects became objects of scientific interest to the emerging discipline of anthropology.¹¹⁴ Rivers was one of the first anthropologists to promote the systematic collection and recording of cultural products as part of the *Systema Naturae*. He proposed, in 1875, that “products of human industry are capable of classification into genera, species and varieties, in the same manner as the products of the vegetal and animal kingdom” (cited in Steiner 1994: 108-9). While the exotic trophies collected by a private gentleman collector of the pre-modern era confirmed his elite status as man of the world, the public collections of the 19th century must be perceived as “visual windows through which one could catch a glimpse of ‘primitive man’” (Steiner 1994: 109).¹¹⁵ Despite the increase in taxonomic

¹¹² Errington (1998: 10) points out that, in fact, collectors on the early voyages of exploration tended to concentrate more on fauna and flora, of which they kept quite thorough records – articles of human manufacture were not of major interest and, unlike natural items, were largely collected as curiosities and unrecorded miscellanies. Natural and artificial objects were moreover haphazardly jumbled together in an indiscriminate mass.

¹¹³ As signifiers of difference, collectors often chose the most extreme and ‘hideous’ artefacts (such as trophy heads) which confirmed European prejudices about the inhuman customs of the ‘primitive Other’ (Goldwater 1962: 2).

Goldwater also reminds us that most of the objects collected were of Oceanic origin since few attempts were made to penetrate the African interior and trade continued to concentrate largely on the coast (1962: 3).

¹¹⁴ Mudimbe (1994: 61) provides a list that illustrates the proliferation of natural history and ethnographic museums from the mid 19th century onwards: 1856 - Berlin - Ethnographic section added to Museum of Antiquities; 1866-76 - Oslo – Museum of Ethnography; 1877 - Yale and Harvard Peabody museums; 1869-74 – New York - American Museum of Natural History; 1878 Le Trocadéro, Paris; 1888 Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology; 1891 Göteborg museum of Ethnography; 1893 Chicago - Field Museum of Ethnography; 1897 Terveuren – The Congo Exhibition; 1899 Philadelphia - The University Museum.

¹¹⁵ Errington proposes that the establishment of museums should be seen as part of the consolidation of the powers of the nation state in the second half of the 19th century, where a number of formerly private domains became public. She mentions as examples the transformation of private game reserves into public zoos; private book collections into public libraries; and the pleasure grounds of the rich into public parks (1998: 8).

effort, however, the conception of art objects as objects of natural history meant that they were still incorporated into an interdisciplinary jumble of palaeontological, entomological and geological displays.

According to Karp, the intensification and systematisation of the collection of African material culture in the 19th century was also because they served as “trophies of imperial conquest” (1991: 16), and literally aided the imperial project by supplying information about the colonised.¹¹⁶ Thus the complicity of ethnography and the colonial enterprise was unequivocally declared, and, equally significantly, the ‘primitive’ art object’s semiotic status as sign of essential difference (and, paradoxically of essential unity) was emphatically stated.

If the 18th century amateur anthropologist and naturalist struggled to allocate a proper site for the exotic object, the 19th century ‘scientific’ anthropologist found a place for it: prior to Historical time. In the natural history museum the visitor could experience a “safari in geological space” in which taxonomic and realist models (usually dioramas) froze ‘primitive cultures’ forever in the timeless and eternal realm of nature (Errington 1998: 22). Here visitors could see ‘typical primitives’ alongside their cultural artefacts in an Edenic time before time. Thus it was made abundantly clear that ‘primitives’ and their cultures belonged to the realm of nature (the Eternal) rather than to the realm of culture (the Historical).

The 19th century obsession with the grand narrative of progress necessitated the consolidation of linear time which, as Errington argues, entailed the temporalising of the Great Chain of Being (1998: 11).¹¹⁷ The scientific paradigm determined that African cultural objects lost their uncertain status as marginal wonders and were relocated to the beginnings of the hierarchical evolutionary scale, in a temporal space before Historical time. The ethnographic museum, Mudimbe (1994: 61) suggests, was influenced by the evolutionary paradigm since its inception, since these museums were motivated by the need to preserve, for Western eyes, the rapidly

¹¹⁶ The appeal by the ethnographer Siebolt (1848) for the creation of more ethnographic museums reveals the reason why the establishment of museums in the latter half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century coincided with the period of most intensive European imperialist expansion. Commenting on the usefulness of ethnographic museums, Siebolt argued that objects made by ‘primitives’ provided a key to their essential cultural difference and constituted an efficient means of knowing them in order to dominate them. He recommended that, particularly for European states with colonies, ethnographic museums supplied a means of understanding subject peoples and awakening the general public and merchants to the possibilities of lucrative markets in the non-European world: “His voice shares imperialist assumptions of an intellectual atmosphere which was already present and which, in the second part of the 19th century, led to the scramble for Africa” (Mudimbe 1994: 60).

¹¹⁷ The evolutionist temporalisation of the ‘Great Chain’ entailed, Fabian points out, that the spatial visualisation of this hierarchy changed to that of a tree. He suggests that the diagram of the tree has always been one “of the simplest ways of constructing a visual classificatory scheme based on subsumption and hierarchy” (1983: 15).

vanishing cultures of soon to be extinct peoples. The evolutionary notion that non-Western cultures served as examples of Europe's pre-history also impacted on museum displays: "The ethnographic museum enterprise espoused a historical orientation, deepening the need for the memory of an archaic European civilization and, consequently, expounding reasons for decoding exotic and primitive objects as symbolic and contemporary signs of a Western antiquity" (Mudimbe 1994: 61). The evolutionary paradigm often led to displays along linear timelines, suggesting that the underlying motive of many of these exhibitions was to posit 'primitive' art as the distant beginnings of a journey of progress led by the West (Errington 1998: 18).¹¹⁸

Although ethnographic and natural history museums advanced the scientific interest in African material culture, it is important to remember, as Torgovnick (1990: 77) points out, that even at the turn of the 20th century these museums looked like warehouses in which 'primitive art' from diverse parts of the world were haphazardly grouped with functional objects. Antique and ethnological objects were indiscriminately thrown together. Objects aroused interest primarily for the technology they displayed (as evidence of Darwinian stages of technological advancement) rather than for their aesthetic value. Thus the ethnographic display foregrounded the informational value (to the colonising nation) of the objects on display, and rarely commented on their formal dimensions. Labels and information boards accompanying these displays liberally used words such as 'ceremony', 'ritual', 'fetish', 'totemic', 'sacred', 'sacrificial', 'initiation', and 'ancestor', which confirmed their primitive exoticism in Western eyes (Errington 1998: 83).

In the early 20th century, the status of the non-Western cultural object changed suddenly and dramatically from ethnographic object to art object:

At the turn of this [the 20th] century, it was self-evident that primitive objects were 'idols' fit only to be burned by missionaries or to teach would-be colonialists about the territories they would enter; within twenty years it became equally clear that primitive statues were beautiful objects, suitable for collectors (Torgovnick 1990: 13).

¹¹⁸ The famous Crystal Palace exhibition of 1851, for instance, was mainly intended as competitive display of the technological advances of the various nation states. The inclusion of 'primitive' art in this context confirms the importance of 'the primitive' (with the exotic art object as its primary sign) in the formulation of the grand narrative of progress. Often displays were accompanied by narrative friezes representing the colonial presence as salvation.

The reason for the sudden re-evaluation of the 'primitive' object was its celebrated 'discovery' by the European avant-garde.¹¹⁹ When Modernist artists such as Picasso, Klee, and the German Expressionists started collecting African and Oceanic art and appropriating some of their formal characteristics, the art theorists Fry and Worringer (and anthropologists such as Boas and Einstein) took note and launched the first tentative attempts to incorporate 'primitive art' into the hitherto exclusively Eurocentric canon of high art. Whereas the aesthetic evaluation of African material culture was still overwhelmingly dismissive at the turn of the century,¹²⁰ Fry provocatively pronounced 'Negro sculpture' formally superior to most European art barely a decade later. Art museums followed suit by tentatively opening their doors to 'primitive' art.

The apotheosis of 'primitive' objects into art was, however, inevitably accompanied by tensions and ambiguities. Whereas the natural history museum, as its name suggests, dealt with the realm of nature, the art museum accommodated its binary opposite: culture. Whereas nature is timeless, the art museum, being called upon to display culture, is concerned with time, nationhood and civilisation (Errington 1998: 25). Art history, and hence art museum displays, proposed a developmental history of art as the progressive unfolding of a universal creative spirit. Since this development was periodised according to European historical eras, and since 'primitive art' was deemed timeless and a-historical, it could not easily be assimilated by the art museum. Moreover, since the development of art history was coterminous with the consolidation of the powers of the nation state, essentialistic notions of national cultural characteristics predominated in art museums, which commonly grouped art according to national origin – a practice which caused further problems when it came to the display of 'primitive' objects. The most common solution was to display 'primitive art' in separate wings or in specially created museums of 'primitive art'. Furthermore, 'primitive' objects were chosen that conformed most closely to Western expectations of what an artwork should look like – hence small, portable sculptural pieces of 'acceptable' art material (such as wood or metal) took precedence over large, multi-media pieces made out of 'uncommon' materials such as fibre or cloth. Durable objects were preferred, to which end objects were often stripped of their soft or fibrous parts.¹²¹ In

¹¹⁹ Errington points out that narratives of 'discovery' assert the essentially modernist value of art as universal and transcultural language (1998: 54)

¹²⁰ As exemplified by Mary Kingsley whose statement that "the African had never made an even fourteenth-rate piece of cloth or pottery" was axiomatic (cited in Mudimbe 1988: 10).

¹²¹ Errington points out that it was common in the West to link durability with civilisation – she mentions the example of prominent critic and art historian Kenneth Clarke, who associated advanced civilisations with the construction of permanent structures (1998: 81).

order to further comply with Western expectations, 'primitive' objects were often framed or mounted on pedestals, which signified their new status as artworks. However, in accordance with the notion that the African artist creates not as an individual but as a member of a collective or representative of his community, 'primitive' objects were generally labelled according to tribe rather than artist – a pointed comment in a space which is geared towards the almost ritual sanctification of the individuality of the Western artist. This anonymity was accompanied by the radical decontextualisation of the art object. In accordance with the growing formalist trend in art history, contextual information was deemed irrelevant, if not detrimental, to the formal appreciation of the artwork.

It is important to note that the chronological trajectory I have sketched here does not mean that the appropriation of African culture as art replaced its display as ethnographic object. Alongside the art museum, the ethnographic museum continued displaying 'primitive' cultural artefacts as objects of knowledge. Thus one could find two virtually identical items in two radically different signifying sites – in the hushed and holy 'white cube' of the art museum, surrounded by space, mounted on a pedestal, with a spotlight aimed at it; and in the crowded and dusty shelves of the ethnographic museum, jumbled with tools, photographs and items of clothing. These two spaces can be made to stand, metaphorically, for the two discourses of art history and ethnography: in the one (in a separate 'wing' exclusively devoted to the 'primitive') the artwork is stripped of all contextual references and attention is exclusively focused on its formal and aesthetic characteristics; and in the other the object is wholly immersed (and thus aesthetically extinguished) in the cluttered details of the cultural life of the timeless 'primitive' isolate. The institutionalised distinction between the two discourses of art history and anthropology, according to Clifford (2002: 222), suggests that the "aesthetic-anthropological opposition is systematic, presupposing an underlying set of attitudes towards the 'tribal'" and that both domains "assume a primitive world in need of preservation, redemption, and representation".

There are numerous dimensions of the Western collection and display of 'primitive art' that I have not begun to touch upon in the above overview: notably the shameless plundering and theft that accompanied collection; the economic and productive impact of collecting on the society of origin; the market for, and rampant commodification of 'primitive art', and the attendant problematic of authenticity - to name but a few. The creation of various markets for 'primitive' art, in particular, irrevocably alters the frame of production in the community of origin, as Steiner argues in *African Art in Transit* (1994), but also, as both Steiner (1999)

and Price (1989) conclusively prove, significantly impacts on the aesthetic (and hence monetary) value of the 'authentic primitive' art object in the West. These are fascinating issues to consider, but regrettably beyond the scope of this thesis. I have chosen, instead, to concentrate on those aspects of collection and display that demonstrate the major anthropological and art historical shifts that occurred in the evaluation of the art of non-Western peoples, so as to frame my discussion of the discursive reception of African art in the 19th and 20th centuries.

3.3 ETHNOGRAPHY AND AFRICAN MATERIAL CULTURE

In this section, I outline the key presuppositions underlying a succession of seminal ethnographic perspectives on African material culture from a broadly postcolonial/post-structural critical perspective.¹²² The discipline of anthropology has undergone a sustained and at times devastating critique since the 1970s - to such an extent that it has been radically transformed and its future remains seriously in doubt.¹²³ It stands to reason that I can neither provide a detailed historiography of anthropology nor an in-depth account of the numerous critiques levelled against this beleaguered discipline in my thesis. Rather I have concentrated on the broad implications of the most influential anthropological paradigms, and have tried to assess how they impacted on the reception of the African art object. I have aimed to distil from the multiplicity of writings those notions and prejudices that became absorbed into the public realm (or were shared by the public to begin with), and that solidified into a stock of presuppositions that informed both popular and academic discourses on modern black artistic practice in South Africa. If this account is, in consequence, a bit reductive, this ultimate intention must be kept in mind.

Fabian's ground-breaking book *Time and the Other* (1983) drew attention to the role different conceptions of time played in successive anthropological theories. His central thesis is that

¹²² Since so much modernity critique centres on key Western imperialist assumptions about non-Western peoples, anthropology has been a particularly vulnerable target of postcolonial deconstructive practices because this discipline was created, above all, "to interrogate the construction of difference. To separate ruler from ruled, light from dark" (Comaroff 2001: 37). Fabian insists that: "Anthropology's claim to power originated at its roots. It belongs to its essence and is not a matter of accidental misuse. ... Anthropology's alliance with the forces of oppression is neither a simple nor a recent one" (1983: 1).

¹²³ This critique was launched by Hymes' *Reinventing Anthropology* in 1974. Hymes was the first to argue that anthropological knowledge was tainted by imperialist/colonialist interests. Foster (1975) points out that this New Left critique was not only aimed at anthropology's complicity in British imperialism, but also at the role played by anthropologists in the American neo-imperialistic interventions in Vietnam. The most influential deconstructions of anthropology and ethnography are those of Asad (1975), Boon (1982), Clifford & Marcus (1986), Fabian (1983), and Geertz (1973 & 1988).

various anthropological conceptions of time served to establish and entrench power relations between the West and the Rest and thus played a seminal part in the dialectical constitution of the Other. The following brief and selective discussion of various anthropological and art critical approaches to the 'Primitive' art object therefore pays particular attention to the way in which they conceive of time, since the ambiguities raised by anthropological temporality reverberates, also, in writing on modern black art. In this regard, space also features as an important dimension, since time and space are often conflated or mutually determined in anthropological conceptions of the Other.

The pioneering professional anthropologists were predominantly concerned with a comparative study of the essential differences between 'savage' and 'civilised' societies and did not pay much heed to art objects. Tylor's influential and tone-setting publication of 1871, *Primitive Culture*, for instance, was mainly concerned with "determining the relation of the mental condition of savage to that of civilized man" and included very little discussion of 'primitive' arts (cited in Goldwater 1962: 27). The material arts of the 'primitives' were regarded merely as a guide to the essential condition of savagery. When art objects were discussed, they were usually dismissed as failed naturalistic representations.¹²⁴ Clearly the term 'art' was not felt to be a concept that could be applied to 'savages'. The concept of 'culture', however, is central in Tylor's definitive text, and his inclusive redefinition of the term exerted considerable influence on the development of cultural anthropology. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the term 'culture' had gradually come to assume elitist connotations in the 18th and 19th centuries, and was used to describe the 'highest' artistic activities of the upper classes. 'Culture' thus came to be associated with the most refined endeavours of civilised society. Tylor produced a radical redefinition of the term which enabled it to be used in modern anthropology to refer to both 'savage' and 'civilised' societies:¹²⁵

Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (in Lemaire 1976: 74).

Tylor was therefore instrumental in producing a modern, spacious definition of culture that could accommodate a wide variety of activities and societies. Yet, as Lemaire (1976: 74)

¹²⁴ Naturalism remaining, in the mid 19th century, the dominant touchstone of artistic value in the West.

¹²⁵ Tylor's popularisation of the concept 'culture' to include a broad range of activities not only had an influence on cultural anthropology, but also facilitated a broadening of the category in the West to include 'popular' culture such as folk art and crafts.

points out, the more inclusive sense of culture inaugurated by Tylor does not celebrate plurality and difference, but rather proposes one, universal culture as evinced by his use of the singulars 'culture' and 'civilization' rather than the more plural 'cultures' and 'civilizations'. Culture is thus conceived as one, collective process of development and progress, and the elite culture of the West remains the normative standard against which all other 'stages of development' are measured.¹²⁶

The positivistic comparative model (the comparison between essential states of 'savagery' and 'civilisation') rests upon a 'science of culture' which aimed at mapping the evolutionary stages of human intellectual development as "a singular process of ever increasing rationality" (Stocking cited in Lemaire 1976: 75). Broad classificatory terms are employed to describe 'typical' savage mental states. Lemaire (1976: 72-73) points out that these generalist and inclusive categorical descriptions (such as Tylor's 'animism', which he used to describe a 'primitive' religious consciousness) were introduced to demonstrate the positivist philosopher Comte's proposed progressive stages in the development of man's intellect from a low state of savagery to the higher reaches of civilisation.

The binary dialectic between absolute 'savagery' and absolute 'civilisation' as two radically different states of being indicates the use of the ethnographic convention of 'typological time' which, according to Fabian (1983: 22-23):

... signals a use of Time which is on a (linear) scale, but in terms of socioculturally meaningful events or, more precisely, intervals between such events. Typological Time underlies such qualifications as preliterate vs. literate, traditional vs. modern, peasant vs. industrial, and a host of permutations which include pairs such as tribal vs. feudal, rural vs. urban. In this use, time may almost totally be divested of its vectoral, physical connotations. Instead of being a measure of movement it may appear as a quality of states; a quality, however, that is unequally distributed among human populations of this world. Earlier talk about peoples without history belongs here, as do more sophisticated distinctions such as the one between 'hot' and 'cold' societies.

Typological time is thus characteristic of early anthropological accounts of 'the primitive/savage', but evidently, as Fabian's definition makes clear, remains entrenched in

¹²⁶ Lemaire thus cautions that Tylor's 'democratization' of the term 'culture' does not mean that the term had shed its elitist, Eurocentric implications. Tylor's concept of culture remained interwoven with a culture-ideal that was still overwhelmingly hellenocentric and ethnocentric (1976: 78-79).

cultural discourse today. The art historical use of 'modern' to refer to artists' socio-cultural identity rather than their physical contemporaneity indicates the pervasiveness of typological time.¹²⁷ As will be demonstrated in the next chapter, the tradition/modernity dialectic, in particular, with its implications of two radically different and mutually exclusive states, remains firmly embedded in cultural discourse and can be discerned in almost all writing on modern African cultural production.

Darwin's theories of natural selection and evolution, and the Social Darwinist theories that followed in their wake, spurred an interest in the cultures of 'primitive peoples' and provided the dominant theoretical paradigm for the study of 'primitive art' in the latter half of the 19th century.¹²⁸ Fabian points out that anthropology gained its status as a science and academic discipline under this paradigm. Since ethnography took shape under evolutionist epistemological conditions, this paradigm continued to exert an influence over anthropological theory long after it had been discredited (1983: 15). While, as mentioned earlier, the first generation of professional anthropologists paid scant attention to art objects, the second generation of anthropologists (approximately 1890 to 1910), evinced particular interest in cultural objects since it was believed that evolutionary stages could be discerned in the ornaments and cultural objects of peoples at different stages of evolutionary development (Gerbrands 1990: 15).¹²⁹ Yet, since origins were regarded as of particular importance, interest focused more on archaeological findings than on the products of extant societies.

Frobenius, the first anthropologist to publish on African sculpture (in 1899), regarded Africa as humanity's 'childhood' and refused to entertain the possibility that Africans were responsible for any of the more 'sophisticated' building complexes and cultural achievements on the continent, and hence ascribed them to a forgotten Western presence.¹³⁰ Thus the perception of

¹²⁷ I am of course guilty of perpetrating typological time in this thesis by calling black artists who work in traditionally 'Western' materials 'modern black artists'. While I tried numerous alternative ways of distinguishing between 'traditional' and 'modern' practices, longer descriptive terms proved to be cumbersome and unworkable. It soon became clear that these dialectical terms provide a terminological shorthand that is almost impossible to dispense with without jeopardising communication. Like numerous authors before me who have tried to deconstruct binary oppositions, I find myself frustratingly unable to deconstruct dualistic terms and categories without resorting to their use.

¹²⁸ However, it is important to keep in mind - as Fabian (1983: 14) points out - that proto-evolutionary and developmental theories were common well before Darwin's publications.

¹²⁹ Coombes (1994: 8) confirms that the period 1890-1913 was particularly significant as regards the development of theories around African material culture. This period not only saw the rise of ethnography and anthropology as professional sciences, but the scramble for Africa resulted in the unprecedented influx of African material culture into Europe.

¹³⁰ He claimed, for instance, that Ife was a remnant of the lost civilisation of Atlantis. Following in his footsteps, a number of later more populist authors ascribed the archaeological remains of various African civilisations to foreign influence, even to aliens from outer space (Torgovnick 1990: 10). The notion of 'lost' civilisations of

the African as perpetual child was responsible for what Gilroy calls “the hellenomaniacal excision of Africans from the narrative of civilization’s development” (1993: 59). This tendency to view Africans as representative of the ‘immature’ and ‘developing’ state of human existence was commonplace in an age overwhelmingly convinced that, like biological organisms, human societies undergo a universal process of development from simple (early) to complex (late). In this popular evolutionism, there was a tendency to confuse *ontogeny* and *phylogeny* – to apply concepts of the psycho-social development of the individual to the evolutionary development of the human species as a whole. As initially articulated by Hegel, maturation and civilisation were seen as coterminous. In this conflation of concepts, “primitives then come to represent not only the childhood of human evolution, but also the children of the 20th century world” (Price 1989: 48). For this reason, according to Gellner, (in Fabian 1983: 39): “Systematic study of ‘primitive’ tribes began first in the hope of utilizing them as a kind of time-machine, as a peep into our own historic past, as providing closer evidence about the early links in the great series.”

Darwin’s theory of evolution proposed a secularised and naturalised time which constituted a definitive break from biblical time (the dominant temporal paradigm of the Judeo-Christian view). Under the influence of Darwin, Tylor proposed that the “history of mankind is part and parcel of the history of nature” (Lemaire: 1976: 67). However, the Social Darwinists, according to Fabian, ‘rehistoricised’ Darwin’s naturalised time, since their desire to find meaningful development in human history could not accommodate the discontinuous, random and fractured implications of Darwinian naturalised time. Naturalised time was adopted, but infused with the notion of *necessary* development. Hence time (and evolution) came to be regarded as both chronicle *and* chronology. This teleological notion of naturalised time as an inevitable, progressive unfolding, with a universal human evolution leading in stages to civilisation as its triumphant conclusion, characterised most social evolutionist theories. In addition, Social Evolutionists (such as Morgan and Spencer) also spatialised time. The relationship between different parts of the world were conceived not only in spatial terms (different cultural characteristics as belonging to different geographical locations), but also in terms of temporal zones. Dispersal in space came to be equated with dispersal in time (there=then), which allowed for the existence of ‘contemporary ancestors’. Thus the coevalness of the primitive Other could be systematically denied even within a universalising humanist frame:

mysterious Western origin continued to inflame the popular cultural imagination – as evidence by the Tarzan novels and, in South Africa, the Baudrillardian Lost City at the Sun City entertainment complex near Rustenburg.

... evolutionary sequences and their concomitant political practice of colonialism and Imperialism may look incorporative; after all, they create a universal frame of reference able to accommodate all societies. But being based on the episteme of natural history, they are founded on distancing and separation (Fabian 1983:26).

In addition to occupying a space lower down and further back in the temporal scale than the West (and hence being seen as examples of the West's own ancestry), 'primitive' cultures were paradoxically also written entirely out of time. This relegation of 'the primitive' to an allochronic dimension – a timeless and changeless realm before history – paradoxically coexisted with the notion of 'the primitive' as the point of departure for a diachronic journey of progressive development.

The evolutionist paradigm had significant implications for the interpretation of 'primitive' cultures (best exemplified in the writings of Semper). Since Western civilisation was assumed to be the most advanced, and naturalism was the style of Europe's 'maturity', it was accepted that geometric, stylised or abstracted art signified an earlier stage of cultural development.¹³¹ Thus art was seen in terms of a purely technical evolution from unskilled (stylised) to skilled (naturalistic) attempts to copy nature. Most evolutionary anthropologists concentrated exclusively on ornament since it was believed that ornamentation most vividly demonstrated the evolutionary development from abstract to naturalistic.¹³² It was also assumed that ornament was the earliest, most basic form of human artistic endeavour. Thus Haddon concluded that 'primitive' art was stylised because 'savage' artists, being unequal to the task of copying nature, had to resort to copying one another (Goldwater 1962: 31). The use of geometric pattern happened involuntarily and unconsciously, and aesthetic preference played no role whatsoever: "It is inconceivable that a savage could copy or adapt a certain design because it promises to develop into a more pleasing pattern" (Hadden, quoted in Goldwater 1962: 32).¹³³

¹³¹ In this regard, the naturalism of Palaeolithic art versus the abstraction of the later Neolithic art generated much puzzlement, with the result that most evolutionists chose to simply omit the Palaeolithic from their accounts. As will be discussed later, the Modernist theorist Fry used this 'puzzle' to argue that abstraction indicated a more developed consciousness than naturalism.

¹³² With the exception of the Degenerationists, who proposed that stylised ornamentation was the result of the repeated copying (and hence degeneration) of initially quite naturalistic designs.

¹³³ The dismissal of the aesthetic impulse in 'the savage' was not uniform, however. Goldwater mentions that there was opposition to this denigrating point of view from, among others, the Parisian anthropologist Hamy, who argued that "as from many other points of view, savages are true children: they draw, they mess in paints, they model, like children" (1962:34)!

Despite the waning influence of evolutionist theory in 20th-century anthropology, evolutionism continued to exert a powerful influence on 20th-century art critical discourse around 'the primitive'. The continued use of the term 'primitive' already presupposes an evolutionist understanding. Lemaire mentions a resurgence in evolutionist theories after World War 2 under the influence of a Neo-Marxist materialism that saw culture as a means in the evolutionary struggle for existence and survival (1976: 199 - 202). The decades of the '50s, '60s, '70s and '80s saw a proliferation of popular publications on 'primitive' art in which evolutionism was a standard presupposition.¹³⁴ The following passage from Christensen's *Primitive Art* (1955) clearly demonstrates how evolutionism and the accompanying presupposition of savage superstition and emotionalism was the received wisdom of the day:

... what may appear to us as the limitations of primitive art ... can be considered the by-products of man's slowly evolving intellectual powers. With little knowledge and few facts to reason with, primitive man's endeavour to explain the universe was largely swayed by his emotions. What beliefs he developed served to assuage his fears and thereby to contribute to his sense of security. Frequently the personified forces of nature were induced to serve his needs. In primitive cultures ritual was as important as belief, and art occupied a prominent place in ritual. Often, therefore, it is not art that is limited, but the underlying belief for which it serves as vehicle (quoted in Price 1989: 38-9).

The most serious and sustained challenge to evolutionism came from the functionalists, the historical-particularists and the structuralists. I will not compare these 'schools' at length, but will concentrate on those aspects of their theories that most demonstrably influenced subsequent writings on African art, and that left perceptible traces in 20th-century South African interpretations of modern black art.

The 'maturation' of anthropology in the first half of the 20th century as 'independent, empirical and value-free science' coincided with the consolidation of European colonial powers in Africa.¹³⁵ Feuchtwang (1975: 83) suggests that the new, more empiricist anthropological schools of the early 20th century met the administrative needs of the established African

¹³⁴ Husband mentions that the resurgence of evolutionist race theories in the '60s and '70s managed to undo much of the serious contestation of race that took place after World War 2. Popular socio-biological books by authors such as Ardrey and Morris served to re-naturalise race and pushed public opinion about race, gender and class in favour of deterministic nature rather than nurture (1982: 17).

¹³⁵ James (1975: 46) points out that the scientific claims of functional anthropology amounted to a bid for credibility: "Science represented to the crude colonial mind a great achievement of the modern west, and the idea of its application to native peoples, as objects, was promising."

colonies. The early 20th century saw the rise of cultural relativism, which methodically attempted to eliminate Western ethnocentrism from anthropological research. This cultural relativism entailed, inter alia, the rejection of a Western evolutionist historicism which insisted on placing all 'primitive' cultures on a developmental timeline determined (and led) by the West, and introduced the 'radical' proposition that all cultures were fundamentally unique and that, therefore, they were fundamentally of equal worth. The American anthropologist, Boas, warned against the projection of Western values and norms on 'other' cultures, and insisted that any general theories of cultures were bound to perpetrate ethnocentric biases - hence his distrust of abstract theory: "Absolute systems of phenomena as complex as those of culture are impossible. They will always be reflections of our own culture" (in Lemaire 1976: 87).¹³⁶

Functionalism developed in England in the 1920s with Brown and Malinowski as its main exponents. Functionalist anthropology (which had its origins in Durkheimian sociology), was based on a critique of the armchair theorising of the evolutionists.¹³⁷ The functionalists stressed the importance of empirical research based on close and sustained contact between the anthropologist and the society under investigation, and aimed at correcting the dismissive and overgeneralised prejudices of the evolutionists and earlier amateur ethnographers by determining the particular function of the art object within the social, religious and political structures of the community in question. Durkheim proclaimed that attentiveness to the specificity of context nullified the evolutionists' claims that civilisations progress with irreversible thrust along a universal developmental route. Functionalist anthropologists focused on the way any given society works as a system, and attempted to understand how parts of the system interrelated to achieve and maintain a state of equilibrium. Art, as Ben-Amos (1989: 3) points out, was regarded as no different to any other part of the culture-system and was studied as one functional element among many in the maintenance of social homeostasis. The functionalists therefore showed only a passing and incidental attention to the art object.¹³⁸

In contrast to this sociological model the historical-particularists (of which Boas was the main exponent), focused on culture as the main explanatory variable of any given social structure.

¹³⁶ Herskovits similarly championed cultural relativism as the 'cure' for ethnocentric projection and as a corrective for Western arrogance: "The very core of cultural relativism is the social discipline that comes of respect for differences - of mutual respect. Emphasis on the worth of many ways of life, not one, is an affirmation of the values in each culture" (in Lemaire 1976: 94).

¹³⁷ Asad (1975: 33) suggests that, in fact, functionalism is a "non-theory, a theory which arose out of the practice of fieldwork".

¹³⁸ Ben-Amos mentions the exception of Firth, who applied the functionalist approach to an intensive study of 'primitive art' (*The Social Framework of Primitive Art*, 1951) (1989: 4). In keeping with the focus on function, however, this study did not attempt any discussion of 'primitive art' as *art*.

For Boas the term 'culture' described a set of beliefs, customs, rituals and values that were passed on from generation to generation and that determined a particular social structure. Art formed an important part of this cultural socialisation and hence constituted a major focus for the historical-particularist.

Both the functionalists and the historical-particularists have been criticised for 'encapsulating' societies in cultural isolates. Bloch (cited in Fabian 1983: 44-5) criticises this by-product of cultural relativism as follows:

The very process of history is broken up into Gardens of Culture or 'Culture Souls'. These are as unconnected to each other as they are without connection to Man and human labor (which is the pervading matter of history) or to nature ...

According to Boon (1982: xi), this cultural monadism led to a kind of 'exaggeration of cultures' or the accentuating of cultural extremes, while Comaroff (2001: 48) proposes that this emphasis on the monad (which emphasised the unique structure of given societies or cultures) provided the means for the colonial state to fabricate ethnic, racialised subjects – to contribute, as it were, to an ever expanding Imperial 'ethnoscape' of the African continent:

It entailed the compilation of an atlas on which aboriginal 'tribes' and 'peoples' – invented sometimes, and ascribed a collective identity if they did not already share one – were labelled, classified linguistically, and placed in bounded territories; each of the latter being designated as the realm of a legitimate political authority, be it a king, chief, headman, or potentate of some other kind.

Comaroff adds that, in fact, rather than describing 'authentic' and untouched African 'tribes', the ethnic identities described by anthropologists were often (at least partially) the product of the encounter between the autochthonous peoples of Africa and 'the civilizing mission'. Anthropology (and the colonial presence in general) was in fact "deeply implicated in the genesis of modern ethnic identities and differences" (2001: 50). In commenting on the relationship between colonialism and functional anthropology, Lemaire suggests that, while evolutionism provided the ideological justification for the expansionist phase of colonialism, functionalism served to entrench colonialism by enclosing 'primitive' cultures in a static past and hence preventing their modernisation and self-emancipation (1976: 174). The conservative and instrumental potential of cultural relativism was also mined by the apartheid state, as Dubow (1995) convincingly demonstrates in his genealogy of scientific racism in South Africa. The

apartheid policies of '*eiesoortigheid*'¹³⁹ and 'separate development' rested on an extreme monadic concept of cultures propagated at, in particular, Afrikaans universities.

The shared, intersubjective time spent between the anthropologist and his object (and the cultural intervention this entailed) was often simply written out of functionalist anthropological 'monographs'.¹⁴⁰ The extremely a-historical view of cultures as static isolates that maintain an internal integrity and authenticity untouched by the intervention of outside (historical) influences was of course, very difficult to maintain - given that the anthropologists' very presence constituted an act of intervention from 'the outside'.¹⁴¹ The anthropologist construes himself as transsubjective voyeur rather than participant in a process of cross-cultural contact. Thus, Fabian suggests, "Theories of Time' held by various cultures could now be studied with a 'timeless' theory and method" (1983: 41). This 'empirical objectivity' is the prize of a distance that is wrought between the anthropologist as scientific subject, and his object of knowledge - a distance that is once again, as in evolutionist models, based on a negation of coeval existence.¹⁴²

Gerbrands (1990: 18) points out that the shift from evolutionism to cultural relativism in the early 20th century meant that anthropological interest gradually shifted from ornamental design to the three-dimensional art object, but it was only after World War 1 (and the 'adoption' of 'primitive art' by the Modernists), that the study of sculptural objects finally overtook ornamental studies. The ethnologist Vatter, in his influential *Religiöse plastic der Naturvölker* (1926) applied the functionalist ideas of Durkheim and Lévy-Bruhl to the sphere of art. In this functionalist paradigm, the African artist was not regarded as an individual but as representative of his or her particular 'cultural monad'. Likewise, the individual art object functioned as sign of the unique 'culture soul' of the community in question (hence the use of the rhetorical convention '*the* Bambara mask' or '*the* Fang reliquary', etc). Vatter, for instance,

¹³⁹ Which can be loosely translated as 'true to its own character or kind'.

¹⁴⁰ Lemaire points out that relativism, despite promises to the contrary, did not deliver anthropology from ethnocentrism, but rather confirmed the inescapability of ethnocentric projection (1976: 161-164). The notion of 'enculturation' (which proposes that the world view and values of individuals are determined by their particular cultural indoctrination) entrenched the idea that individuals are irretrievably 'culture-bound' - the positivistic exclusion of the 'scientist' from this enculturated subjectivity is not convincing and amounts to an insurmountable contradiction in both functionalist and historical-particularist theory.

¹⁴¹ Later on in his career the functionalist Malinowski conceded that the dimension of time (and hence the possibility of the dynamic of change) had to be admitted - but he proposed a study of a 'system-internal time' rather than a study of the 'shared time' wrought by culture contact.

¹⁴² James' interpretation of the functionalists' insistence on the purity of traditional African societies is interesting and worth considering: she suggests that the functionalists, and Malinowski in particular, were frustrated radicals whose critiques of the modern West manifested as a kind of scientific primitivism. James notes that in his later publications Malinowski bemoaned the over-rapid changes wrought by Western 'progress', and admitted that he practised anthropology as an escape from modernity (1975: 56).

stressed the importance of studying the material, social and religious background of African sculpture in order to finally establish “the relations between the sculpture and the religion of primitive peoples in their dependence on the mental and cultural type [of their particular cultural monad]” (in Goldwater 1962: 56).¹⁴³

According to Ben-Amos (1989: 4) functionalism gave rise to an overemphasis on the utilitarian nature of African art – the core difference between African and Western art was pinned down as a difference between instrumentalism/utilitarianism and the purely aesthetic. Thus the African art object was regarded primarily as instrument in the maintenance of social and religious structures. Boas (in *Primitive Art*, 1927) was therefore unusual in that he was one of the first ethnographers to argue that ‘primitive’ objects reflected and stimulated aesthetic experience and could therefore be aesthetically evaluated:

When the technical treatment has attained a certain standard of excellence, when the control of the process involved is such that certain typical forms are produced, we call the process an art, and however simple the forms may be, they may be judged from the point of view of formal perfection ... (1927: 10).

Although Boas was a cultural relativist, he argued that both the production and appreciation of beauty were universal human traits. Despite Boas’ insistence on the importance of the aesthetic dimension, functionalism remained the dominant paradigm throughout the ‘50s, ‘60s, and ‘70s.¹⁴⁴

Cultural histories of the early 20th century, under the influence of anthropological cultural relativism, perpetuated the perception of cultures as monads. Spengler, for instance, conceived of these monads as morphologically akin to biological organisms. Each closed cultural monad had its own unique ‘soul’ and, like a living organism, underwent a developmental process of birth, growth, maturity and eventual decay (Lemaire 1976: 111).¹⁴⁵ The concept of cultures as biological organisms produced a vision of history as a process that unfolds organically and ineluctably, irrespective of the will of people - like the forces of nature. This ‘organically

¹⁴³ This gave rise to what Kasfir (1984) termed the ‘one tribe, one style’ phenomenon.

¹⁴⁴ Well-known functionalist scholars of African art include Bascom, Biebuyck, Ottenberg, Sieber, and Weil. Thompson only managed to rupture this dominant paradigm in 1973 with his influential research into the dynamic aesthetic norms of the Yoruba.

¹⁴⁵ This ‘naturalising’ of culture as a biological organism, Lemaire proposes, can be ascribed to the decline of historical consciousness (1976:116). As European optimism about perpetual progress waned towards the end of the 19th century, a new scepticism arose towards the optimistic historical consciousness of the Enlightenment project. The notion of infinite progress made way for a vision of cultures as prone to cyclical processes of genesis, growth and decay. The two world wars added impetus to (and were deemed proof of) this idea of cultural decline.

vegetative' concept of cultures differed radically from the rationalistic, constructivistic concept of history that characterised 19th-century historical practice.¹⁴⁶ The 'naturalising' of culture also gave impetus to the spread and consolidation of nationalism. Increasingly nations (also perceived as cultural monads) were represented as imbued with a unique 'soul' (the notion of a *Volksgeist*) that underwent processes of growth, maturity and decline.¹⁴⁷ It is significant that Afrikaner Nationalism developed under the influence of these theories.

Like functionalism, structuralism was profoundly influenced by Durkheim, but particularly by Durkheim's proposition that all societies develop classification systems that are intrinsically dualistic and hierarchical. Durkheim proposed that all societies, irrespective of surface differences, displayed classification systems of the same basic fundamental structure and nature, and all were organised around two domains: the sacred and the profane. Classificatory systems were encoded (and maintained) by means of elaborate systems of signs, and the artwork acted as central key to the unlocking of these systems of signs. It was the task of structuralist anthropology to decode the classificatory systems of cultures in order to uncover their deep structural foundations.¹⁴⁸

Fabian suggests that the structuralist anthropologists (of which Levi-Strauss serves as prime example) contributed to the elimination of time and difference as a significant dimension of anthropology. Since structuralism sought to uncover universals in the social and cultural organisation of human societies, it tended to view the 'surface variety' of cultures (ie: cultural differences) as a form of dissimulation that hid deeply buried 'truths' shared by all human beings/cultures.¹⁴⁹ It is the task of the anthropologist to 'uncover' the layers of unconscious cultural dissimulation to reveal the hidden operatives that determine those norms. This, Fabian points out, again leaves the anthropological subject in command of truth and consciousness, while reifying the perception of the Other as submissive to powers beyond rational and conscious control (1983: 51).¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ The self-neutralisation of the historical consciousness also manifested in structuralism and, Lemaire adds, in existentialism, which escaped time and world history by immersing itself in the fate of the lonely individual (1976: 118).

¹⁴⁷ In addition culture, instead of signifying the highest expression of human rational faculties, came to signify an irrational attachment to tradition and the product of a deep-seated process of enculturation (Lemaire 1976: 116).

¹⁴⁸ Griaule and Leiris are the structuralist anthropologists who are best known for their writings about African art.

¹⁴⁹ Prototypical of this view is Hall's *The Silent Language* (1959), which suggested that any given culture unconsciously regulates and shapes the behaviour of members of that society by imposing norms that serve occluded universal needs, values and survival mechanisms (ie: the universal human 'mind').

¹⁵⁰ Fabian suggests that it is no coincidence that structuralism came to prominence directly after World War 2, when the urge to forge a united humanity (after the totalitarian horrors of a world radically divided) carried particular ideological force. He adds, however, that the 'timelessness' of structuralism contributed ideological

Levi-Strauss insisted that anthropology did not need to concern itself with history. In *The Savage Mind* (1966) (in which Levi-Strauss tried to bridge the distance between Western and 'primitive' thought by proposing that 'primitive' thinking was more rational than had been previously acknowledged) he attacked Sartre's concept of the importance of history (ie contingency) in anthropological study and insisted instead on the empirical objectivity of the researcher (Fabian 1983: 65).¹⁵¹ Anthropology entailed a study of space, whereas time was the proper domain of the historian. However, the 'space' that the structuralist anthropologist concerns himself with, Foucault points out, is a 'tabular' space rather than geographic space (in Fabian 1983: 66). This 'tabular space' is essentially a taxonomic space since it conceives of cultures as semiological systems, organised by a universal logic of oppositions. All cultural isolates are plotted along the same logical, binary grid in this taxonomic space. In addition, Lemaire points out, structuralism was criticised (by the members of the Frankfurt school, among others) for denying the agency of human subjects. It perpetrated a positivistic anti-humanism by suggesting that the individual was merely a conduit for deep structural meanings – an '*objekt van een ordening*' – as Jaeggi puts it (in Lemaire 1976: 362). It is not surprising, therefore, that structuralism contributed to the study of African art a perception of the African artist (and the art object) as unconscious transmitter of deeply seated universal human 'thought structures'. In addition it contributed a suspicious disregard of the artist's stated intentions and intended meanings. The structuralist ethnographer, as privileged 'decoder' of the dissimulating surface of culture, was believed to have a better grasp of the meaning of the artwork than the artist did. Finally, structuralism and functionalism were both criticised for failing to come up with theories that could account for and accommodate change and culture contact.

3.4 THE 'PRIMITIVE' OBJECT AS ART

The functional anthropologist Boas' insistence on the aesthetic value of African art contributed towards its gradual incorporation into art galleries and museums. According to Donald Preziosi (1998: 17):

fodder for the establishment of a new kind of Western imperialism after the decolonisation process that accompanied World War 2 – a phenomenon he calls 'absentee colonialism'. Whereas physical colonisation demanded personal and direct (ie instrumental) 'knowledge' of the colonised (functionalism), the remote colonialism of the neo-colonial order was served by the timeless notion of a shared human nature (1983: 69).

¹⁵¹ Asad (1975) describes Lévi-Strauss' opposition to functionalism as a sharp break with empiricism. He quotes Banaji in this regard: "Structuralism's break with Functional anthropology consisted in a sharp and deliberate displacement of the entire axis of comprehension from the phenomenal space of an immediate intuitive encounter with the savage to the noumenal space of *pensée sauvage*, established like any code, by the rigorous non-intuitive procedures of science" (1975: 34).

Art history shared with its allied fields, and especially with museums, the fabrication of elaborate typological orders of 'specimens' of artistic activity linked by multiple chains of causality and influence over time and space and across the kaleidoscope of cultures (which could thereby be interlinked in evolutionary and diffusionist ways). The immense labour on the part of generations of historians, critics, and connoisseurs was in the service of assigning to objects a distinct place and moment in the historical 'evolution' of what thereby became validated as the pan-human phenomenon of *art* as a natural and legitimate subject in its own right; as cultural matter of deep significance because of what it arguably *revealed* about individuals, nations, or races [italics in the original].

Art history and art criticism contributed to the discourses about African material culture a distinct set of assumptions and methodologies. Predominant among these, and shared by virtually all art historians and art critics, is the assumption that the art object is fundamentally evidential - that the objects of art historical study are "uniquely privileged in the degree to which they are able to communicate, symbolize, express, or embody certain deep or fundamental truths about their makers or sources, whether that be a single person or an entire culture of people" (Preziosi 1998: P 21). Art history thus added to discourse about African material culture an axiomatic belief that the African art object bears testimony to the nature of African society, African belief systems, and 'African psychology' as such. This presumptive semantic 'carrying capacity' of art objects enables the art historian to establish not only the intentions of the individual artist, but to identify the unique traits and characteristics that tie the artwork to a particular space and time.

Added to this, art history developed as a distinct academic discipline under the influence of a Hegelian conception of history as the teleological unfolding of a progressive and universal human spirit. Preziosi points out that Hegel regarded art as historical because it was the sensible presentation of the history of truth's unfolding: "Hegel's theodicy ... renders the visible legible as episodes in a historical novel" (1998: 67). Explicit in this notion of an evolving historical spirit that manifests through the vehicle of the art object is the conception of the unfolding human spirit as "not formless or wandering; it is an evolution, or rather a hierarchical teleology, moving from primitive states to a modern ... state" (Preziosi 1998: 68). Style, in particular, came to be regarded as a signifier of a purposive trajectory of artistic chronology. In this universal chronology, African art was seen to represent earlier stages of humanity's development, while simultaneously revealing a distinctly African ethos or essence.

It hardly needs mentioning that the category of 'art' is loaded with Eurocentric connotations. While innumerable and often conflicting definitions of 'art' were produced in the 19th and 20th centuries, most of these definitions distinguished 'art' from 'non-art' on the basis of its fitness to stimulate aesthetic experience (Sullenger 1979:1). To the 19th-century Western eye, which was accustomed to naturalism, 'primitive art' appeared alien and grotesque and was hence automatically precluded from the realm of the aesthetic. Although Kugler and Semper were the first to apply the term to the artefacts and motifs of 'primitive' societies, they used it selectively to describe only objects that bore a formal resemblance to Western art paradigms (such as sculpture and painting), and they insisted that the use of the term had to be qualified since 'primitive art' was produced without aesthetic volition or intent (Sullenger 1979:2). Within this widespread aesthetic dismissal of 'primitive' material culture, the early 20th-century celebration of 'primitive art' by the German Expressionists, Surrealists and Cubists constituted a violent and provocative rupturing of the precious canon of 'high art'.¹⁵² But it must be kept in mind that by this time the intention to shock had become an entrenched part of the Western art arena. Art history, as a typical modernist discourse, enshrined the concept of art as an activity practised by a grand historical succession of ground-breaking visionaries and brave iconoclasts who were prepared to overthrow convention in order to give form to a dynamic and constantly changing here and now. By the early 20th century the avant-garde had theoretical apologists at hand to act as mediators between the artist and the public (or, more precisely, the members of the upper bourgeoisie who displayed an interest in art). The avant-garde's celebration of 'primitive art' was thus accepted as visionary and led to the almost instantaneous reassessment of African art.¹⁵³

The 20th-century Modernists' exaltation of 'the primitive' rested on certain axiomatic modernist presuppositions and, as Leighton (in Pinder 2002: 234) has pointed out, disseminated a romanticised fiction of Africa:

[The Modernists] embraced a deeply romanticized view of African culture ... and considered Africa the embodiment of humankind in a pre-civilized state, preferring

¹⁵² It must be considered, however, that primitivism was not an invention of the 20th century. Perry (1993) and Rhodes (1994) show that the phenomenon developed in the 19th century, when artists such as the pre-Raphaelites, the symbolists and expressionists sought out 'primitive' sources ('intact' peasant societies, the Gothic etc) in Europe. Primitivism, they point out, was largely the product of a romantic worldview, which sought refuge from modernity in a romanticised past.

¹⁵³ This reassessment did not only emanate from art theoretical circles, but also from anthropologists. Goldwater points out that a spate of books on 'primitive art' appeared between 1915 and 1926. He lists Einstein (*Negerplastik* 1915), Vatter (*Plastik der Naturvolker* 1926), Munro (*Primitive Negro Sculpture*), Von Sydow (*Die Kunst der Naturvolker und der Vorzeit* 1923 & *Kunst und Religion der Naturvolker* 1926).

to mystify rather than to examine its presumed idol-worship and violent rituals ... The modernists' method was to critique [Western] civilization by embracing an imagined 'primitiveness' of Africans whose 'authenticity' they opposed to a decadent west ... they wanted to subvert Western artistic traditions - and the social order in which they were implicated - by celebrating a Nietzschean return to those imagined 'primitive' states whose suppression they viewed as having cut off a necessary vitality.

The popular evolutionist perception of 'the primitive' as a living relic of the originary human mind bred the conviction that 'primitive' artists were free of historical convention, and that their art reflected an untrammelled and pure human vision. The art collector Stein, for instance, argued that "the 'burden of sophistication' had necessitated their [the Modernists'] enthusiasm '... for every primitive period of art in which they could regain a sense of seeing with the uneducated gaze of the savage and the childlike eye'" (Price 1989: 32). Likewise Vatter proposed that Europeans had lost "what the primitive peoples, for so long despised, possessed to the highest degree: a world view which encloses mankind and the All in a deeply felt unity, which constitutes the essence of their religiousness, and has found form in their religious sculpture" (in Goldwater 1962: 57). The assumption that 'primitive savages' were free of sexual inhibition also fed the libertine fantasies of the avant-garde and provided an avenue out of their sexually repressed bourgeois milieu. In their quest for a pure formal language, the Modernists believed that the adoption of 'primitive' art practices would strip them of their civilised veneer, liberate their unconscious from the bounds of rationality and hence free their art from bourgeois constraints.¹⁵⁴ But this liberation from rationality meant immersion in the 'night side of man'.¹⁵⁵

Early 20th-century formalism entailed the gradual elimination of the anecdotal and the narrative and an increasing preoccupation with pure form. In keeping with the truism that all human beings partake of a universal nature, it was believed that pure form, stripped of its referential function, was a universal language capable of communicating across cultural and

¹⁵⁴ The psychoanalytic account of 'primitive art' produced by Von Sydow expresses this sentiment as follows: "The modern impulses to reflective criticism and creative goals destroy the significant, and force each one into an individual direction ... But for the primitive the existing is as much goal as beginning" (in Goldwater 1967: 53).

¹⁵⁵ As mentioned earlier, Picasso used African formal devices to depict disease-ridden prostitutes in *Demoiselles D'Avignon*, thus confirming the link, in the European imaginary, between rampant sexuality, death and Africa as trope of darkness. The misinterpretation of African art as ominous, sexual and violent has been criticised by a number of authors, among them Rubin, Fagg, and Willet. Fagg pointed out that images interpreted as horrific and sinister by Westerners were often intended to be comic, or directed outwards as apotropaic force (Torgovnick 1990: 126).

historical divides.¹⁵⁶ The stylised nature of much 'primitive' art thus provided a stepping stone towards pure geometric abstraction.¹⁵⁷ Most writers who explore the relationship between 'primitive' and modern abstraction, however, introduce some qualification regarding the similarities between them. For De Menil (1962), for instance, the 'primitives' "are what remains of the childhood of humanity. They are plunges into the depths of our unconscious. However great the artist of today or tomorrow, he will never be as innocent as the primitive artist – strangely involved and detached at the same time" (in Price 1989: 33).¹⁵⁸ Since 'primitive' art putatively offered a glimpse of the primordial, universal human state, the formalists generally eschewed a concern with the context of production. Contextual or historical information was in fact deemed extraneous and even detrimental to a proper understanding of 'primitive' art. One of the earliest champions of African art - Einstein (1915) - insisted that contextual knowledge was an impediment to the full aesthetic experience of African sculpture, and Picasso boasted that he positively refused to learn anything about the social context of the 'primitive' art he collected (Goldwater 1962: 51). Guillaime, an early 20th-century collector of both 'primitive' art and the primitivist Modernism it inspired, insisted that "there can be no doubt ... that to bear such matters [context of production] constantly in mind tends to confuse one's appreciation of the plastic qualities themselves" (in Goldwater 1962: 55).

As mentioned earlier, the highly influential formalist art theorist Fry was one of the first authors to propose that 'primitive' art could rescue Western art from the stale confines of representational and narrative conventions. His publications on 'Bushman art' (1910) and

¹⁵⁶ Goldwater cites the example of Breuil, who insisted that the art impulse was essentially the same in all societies, whether 'primitive', prehistoric or modern (1962: 47). Boas, on the other hand, insisted that while the art impulse was universal the significance of artistic form was not (1962: 48). Goldwater points out that the maxim of aesthetic universalism finally put an end to the evolutionist obsession with the 'origins' of art, since it was accepted that the art impulse had simply always been present. Riegl, one of the most vocal exponents of the 'universalist' view, proposed universalism in opposition to the evolutionist materialism of Semper and his school. Riegl insisted that art (which he described as a will-to-form) had to be viewed as an intrinsic part of human nature. As a forerunner of the art historical formalists Riegl saw the will to beauty/form as the highest of the human instincts – an instinct that cut across 'modern' and 'primitive' societies. The re-valuation of geometric abstraction as outflow of an innate human urge to formal beauty was partly a response to the emerging Expressionist movement, which turned to 'primitive art' as source of untrammelled and free creative expression. Wollflin, a follower of Riegl's, was one of the first critics to express appreciation for Modernist abstraction. Another follower was Worringer, whose theories will be discussed shortly.

¹⁵⁷ Frobenius, in commenting on the similarities between Modernist European abstraction and African art and in an unusually formalist mode for an ethnographer, proposed that: "Art calls for simplification. And out of this longing arises the style now first awakening ... in the compulsion towards original primitiveness that appears in this essence of Africa, in this untrimmed coarseness, in this childlike naturalism; and seems to be related to our own childhood" (in Goldwater 1967: 43).

¹⁵⁸ Torgovnick (1990) provides a very thorough deconstruction of various texts (and exhibitions) that sets out to compare 'primitive' and Modernist art – she focuses particularly on the controversial 1984 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (curated by William Rubin) *Primitivism in Modern Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*. Torgovnick demonstrates conclusively that these texts are all premised on a fundamental presupposition about the Western artist as innovative, rational and individualistic, and the African artist as anonymous, instinctive and emotional.

'Negro art' (1920) set the tone for subsequent art critical writings on both African and Modernist art. As one of the first formalists, Fry articulated the central credos of formalism as the fundamental importance of form over content, the idea that the eye had to be 'educated' to perceive form, and the universality of form. According to Torgovnick, Fry's compilation of essays *Vision and Design* (first published in 1920) "uses African art to establish its argument and to dramatize its case for the universality of form as a criterion for evaluating art" (1990: 87). The notion that the eye had to be educated to appreciate the formal properties of art entrenched the importance of the (Western) connoisseur in the interpretation and appreciation of art and established his reputation as a person with unique and exceptional sensibilities.¹⁵⁹ It became a badge of honour and a sign of advanced aesthetic sensitivities to recognise the formal excellence of African art. Fry had high praise for the exceptional formal resolution of African art:

[W]e have the habit of thinking that the power to create expressive plastic form is one of the greatest of human achievements ... it seems unfair to be forced to admit that certain nameless savages have possessed this power not only in a higher degree than we at this moment, but than we as a nation have ever possessed it (1957: 100).

Despite his attacks on contemporary ethnocentrism and bourgeois taste, and his almost unthinkable (for the time) proposition that 'Negro art' was of a higher aesthetic order than Western art, Fry's rhetoric remains firmly rooted in Victorian, colonial prejudice - a prejudice that serves to undercut his exalted praise with ambivalence. It is also notable that his writings remain infused with evolutionist assumptions. In his study of 'Bushman art', Fry suggests that 'Bushmen' were descendents of Palaeolithic man, and that "they have remained at the same rudimentary stage as regards the other arts of life, and have retained something of their [the Palaeolithics'] unique power of visual transcription". He proposes that "all the peoples whose drawing shows this peculiar power of visualisation belong to what we call the lowest of savages; they are certainly the least civilisable, and the South African Bushmen are regarded by other native races in much the same way that we look upon negroes" (1957: 93-4). Fry suggests that the Bushmen's perceptual and artistic acuity are the result of their fine vision, which adapted them so well to their environment that they never needed to evolve any further. He argues that Neolithic man was less well adapted to his environment, and hence evolved further and developed

¹⁵⁹ I use the male pronoun deliberately, since art connoisseurship has traditionally been regarded as a male enclave.

greater intellectual powers. Significantly, Fry proposes that “this greater intellectual power manifested itself in his desire to classify phenomena, and the conceptual view of nature began to predominate” (1957: 95). Thus Fry, who was a champion of Modernist abstraction, inverted the evolutionist assumption that naturalism constituted a higher level of attainment than stylised art. His contrary suggestion that abstraction indicated high levels of conceptual ability supported the conclusion that the Modernists represented the vanguard of progressive artistic evolution.

But if abstraction constituted, for Fry, a sign of advanced evolution, he was not prepared to draw the conclusion that ‘Negroes’ were highly evolved. For Fry, the African typically occupied an allochronic ‘time before time’. Although Fry acknowledged that there were formal similarities between Modernist art and ‘primitive’ art, he saw the former as the result of a long historical process (therefore something that was *attained*), while the latter displayed no process and was thus a mere *given*.¹⁶⁰ He based this presupposition (that abstraction is innate to the African and not the result of process) on the ‘fact’ that African art remained fundamentally unchanged since time immemorial. Torgovnick (1990: 90) points out that Fry functioned under the common misapprehension that the African art objects he studied were ancient - a misunderstanding that gave rise to the fallacy that African art remained formally and stylistically unchanged for centuries. In fact, Torgovnick cautions, most of the African objects that were collected were of recent manufacture. Since African art was largely made of perishable materials, hardly any older objects survived and thus no study of historic change could be undertaken. The fallacy that African art remained static for centuries, and that the African was thus not capable of innovation but remained slavishly tied to tradition, remained one of the most enduring axioms about African art throughout the 20th century, as will be shown in the next chapter.

While Fry acknowledged Africa’s ‘great artists’ and their remarkable ability to conceive of form in all its plasticity, he felt that Africa nonetheless ‘lacked culture’ – by which, it soon becomes clear, he means ‘civilisation’. He concluded that two factors were needed to produce the ‘culture’ which distinguishes civilised peoples:

¹⁶⁰ Price quotes De Zayas on a very similar sentiment: “While the vital and abstract qualities of children’s or African art derived from unconscious expression, these effects in modern art must be achieved by conscious effort” (1989a: 33). Huyghe (1973) distinguished between ‘primitive’ and ‘modern’ abstraction in a similar way: “African and Oceanic art is geometric because its creators are instinctively imitating the ways of nature. It is not in any way the result of sophisticated and concerted research, as modern Western art is, but of an innate way of looking at the world” (Price 1989a: 61).

There must be, of course, the creative artist, but there must also be the power of conscious critical appreciation and comparison. ... It is for want of a conscious critical sense and the intellectual powers of comparison and classification that the negro has failed to create one of the great cultures of the world (1957: 103).¹⁶¹

The African's putative lack of rationality or intelligence manifests also in his disregard for nobility and virtue. Ironically it is this preference for feeling over rationality that imbues African art with its superior plasticity – conversely the Western preoccupation with rationality and ethics manifests as a weakness for beauty and nobility in Western art. The vitality and power of African form therefore rest in the African's penchant for intuition and emotionality.

Fry's writing on 'Bushman' and 'Negro' art is typical of early 20th-century formalism. It assumes the existence of one generic African art and makes no attempt to identify different parts of Africa, or to distinguish between functional and sacro-religious objects. It makes claims regarding the universalism of art, yet avows essential differences between 'the primitives' and the West. It uncritically propagates popular evolutionism and assumes that African art has remained unchanged for centuries. Finally it proposes emotionalism (and an accompanying lack of rational control) as the foundational state of African art.

The 'emotionalism' of African art was also propagated by another early 20th-century art theorist who explored the relationship between Modernism and 'the primitive'. Worringer (*Abstraction and Empathy* 1908) formulated an influential theory about the relationship between naturalism and abstraction, which had considerable impact on the art historical interpretation of both African art and European Modernism. Worringer's influential thesis proposes two major 'currents' in visual culture: classic mimesis (naturalism/realism) and 'primitive' abstraction. Worringer proposes that 'primitive man' - lacking rational explanations for natural events - is "confused and alarmed by life" and thus seeks refuge in "the intuitive creation of absolute values. In untrammelled spiritual activity, primitive man creates for himself symbols of the absolute in geometric or stereometric forms". His art is thus "an exorcism and a negation of life". The 'primitive man' relies on the regular patterning of abstraction "because he stands so lost and spiritually helpless amidst the things of the external world" (in Harrison & Wood 1992: 70-71). Spiritual mastery of the outside world, such as the modern European has

¹⁶¹ As late as 1984 Rubin expounded a similar sentiment when he suggested that the African lacked a 'concept of art' and hence produced objects of very variable and uneven quality. The implication is that it takes a Western connoisseur to distinguish between accomplished and unaccomplished African products, and to recognise African objects as 'art'.

attained, blunts the instinct to protect the self against this world's perceived capriciousness and unnameable dangers. The European tradition of naturalism therefore suggests a comfortable at-oneness with the world, and is characterised by a rationalism which cultivates an empathetic outlook.

As is the case with Fry, evolutionist assumptions underpin Worringer's theories. He suggests that it is only "after the human spirit has passed, in thousands of years of its evolution, along the whole course of rationalistic cognition, [that] the feeling for the 'thing in itself' re-awakens in it as the final resignation of knowledge" (in Harrison & Wood 1992: 71). The abstraction of the European Modernist artist is the result of this evolutionary process: "That which was previously instinct is now the ultimate product of cognition" (Harrison & Wood 1992: 71).

The notion that 'primitive' peoples live in a state of perpetual fear and perplexity because they lack the rational faculties to 'understand' nature and hence control their destinies, became another nugget of received wisdom that was reified in general 20th-century tomes on 'primitive art'. Thus Myers, in *Art and Civilization*, repeats the image of the fear-inspired (and hence superstitious) 'primitive' artists: "The West African negro ... does not make our distinction between reality and unreality [and hence] emotionally the African sculptor is animated by fear of the mysterious elements about him: fear of the dead ... ; fear of jungle beasts; fear of his fellow man; fear of the forces of nature" (1967: 13 – 17). Similarly Lewis Mumford (in 1979) speaks of the "African's success in expressing certain primal feelings evoked by fear and death" (quoted in Price 1989: 40).

It follows that this alleged state of fearfulness and terror would be accompanied by a severely restrictive and authoritarian society - note the following comparison (made in 1969) between a classical Apollo and an African mask by the popular and influential cultural historian, Kenneth Clark:

... both represent spirits, messengers from another world – that is to say, from a world of our own imagining. To the Negro imagination it is a world of fear and darkness, ready to inflict horrible punishment for the smallest infringement of taboo. To the Hellenistic imagination it is a world of light and confidence, in which the gods are like ourselves, only more beautiful, and descend to earth in order to teach men reason and the laws of harmony (in Price 1989: 40).

Given the early 20th-century commonplace that Africans represented 'the universal human mind', African art also elicited interest from psychoanalysts. Segy, for instance, aimed to "show parallels between what the African projects freely in his art and what is buried in our own psychological roots". He added that African art facilitates "contact with our deeper instincts" (in Price 1989: 33). Von Sydow (*Handbuch der Westafrikanischen Plastik*, 1930), likewise applied psycho-analytic methods to a comparison of the aesthetic products of European children, European neurotics and 'savages', with the aim to uncover a fundamental 'primitive' human psychology. Von Sydow concluded that the 'primitive' world-view, as exemplified in West-African sculpture, was one of static unity, system and aristocracy (Goldwater 1967: 53). This again confirmed Fry's outlook that Western art was characterised by process (ie dynamic innovation and change) while 'primitive' art revealed a state of structural stasis within a hierarchical and restricted society.

The decades of the '60s, '70s, and '80s saw a proliferation of popular 'coffee-table' publications on African art. As both Price and Torgovnick point out, the market for 'authentic' African art reached its zenith during this period. Essentialist and typological Othering was a common feature of this literature despite the fact that fellow disciplines (anthropology, history, linguistics) had been actively revising some of the more invidious popular misconceptions. The reactionary stereotypes that prevailed in art theoretical texts can be ascribed to the pervasiveness of the formalist paradigm, which led to a disdain for politics and an unwillingness to consult sources outside the art theoretical canon. The formalist tradition meant that the content of African art remained the domain of anthropology until the 1960s, when, under the German art historian Panofsky's influence, the iconological analyses of imagery became more common. Preston Blier (1988) points out, however, that a lack of contextual information and in situ research meant that attempts at iconological analyses of African art objects remained extremely superficial - often assigning conventional identities to objects (such as deity, fetish, ancestor figure etc) based on conjecture or popular assumption rather than contextual research. Hence all sculptures with sexual organs, for instance, would be typed as fertility figures.

Another factor that determined the perpetuation of certain harmful stereotypes about Africans and African culture was the immensely popular writings of the Belgian missionary Tempels (1949), who promoted the idea that there was a particular, uniquely African way of thinking. This set the trend for a deluge of works which aimed at reconstructing the particular 'world-

view' of the African. Tempels' popular account of 'the African mind' rhetorically suggested one common African personality – an 'Africa-gene' that was shared by all Africans:

We have seen that the Bantu soul hankers after life and force. The fundamental notion under which being is conceived lies within the category of forces ... We can conceive the transcendental notion of 'being' by separating it from its attribute 'force', but the Bantu cannot! (in Van Niekerk 1998: 74).

Popular writing on African art shared this tendency to perceive all African art as the product of a collective (childlike) mentality. Gombrich's *The Story of Art* (1966), which was aimed at familiarising children with 'primitive' art, is typical of this genre:

If most works of these civilizations look weird and unnatural to us, the reason lies probably in the ideas they are meant to convey ... Negroes in Africa are sometimes as vague as little children about what is a picture and what is real ... they even believe that certain animals are related to them in some fairy-tale manner ... [they] live in a kind of dream-world ... It is very much as if children played at pirates or detectives till they no longer knew where play-acting ended and reality began. But with children there is always the grown-up world about them, the people who tell them, 'Don't be so noisy', or 'It is nearly bed-time'. But for the savage there is no such other world to spoil the illusion (cited in Price 1989: 125).

As mentioned before, the Eurocentric nature of art history made accommodation of African art particularly difficult. Under the influence of a Hegelian conception of history, art history developed as a discipline that traced the trajectory of the Great Tradition of Western art. The encyclopaedic 'Histories of Art' that were prescribed at schools and universities commonly provided an account of an 'art spirit' that progressed in linear stages via a succession of named individuals and movements. African arts, presumed to be anonymous and immutable, was therefore difficult to incorporate into this tradition. The two opposing methodologies for Western and 'primitive' arts created problems in general encyclopaedic art historical texts which attempted to include both. Authors that attempted a 'world history of art' (such as Gardner, whose textbooks were prescribed reading in South African schools for decades), tried various strategies, but most commonly tended to incorporate the arts of Africa and Oceania in a general introductory chapter on 'prehistory', thus collapsing

temporal distinctions between the ancient and the contemporary.¹⁶² Christensen (1955) and Maquet (1986) wrote their accounts of African art in the past tense, as though it was the product of ancient, extinct cultures.

One of the art historical conventions that created problems for the inclusion of African art was the analysis of style as a cardinal disciplinary procedure. Style had long been used as a means of classification in art history, with the underlying assumption that styles were irrevocably tied to a specific time and place (Adams 1989: 56). The various ethnic and national styles were seen as the spontaneous expression of essential and innate 'deep structural' typological attributes and characteristics. General histories of art often grouped artists according to national origin, on the understanding that 'innate' national traits and characteristics tended to manifest as particular stylistic attributes. Art historical attempts to come to terms with African art thus tended to apply this dominant intellectual paradigm by isolating the sculptural styles that belonged to different geographical regions (and later, increasingly, nations).¹⁶³ Fagg, who was curator of the British Museum's African collection, thus "actively promoted the view that each tribe was a closed cultural universe, expressing itself in a distinct, recognizable and unitary 'style'" (Adams 1989: 57). This 'one tribe, one style' paradigm was given impetus by functionalist anthropology, which saw the distinctive 'style' of any given 'tribe' as sign of that cultural monad's unique social formation.

The 'tribal paradigm', under the influence of functionalism, became the dominant paradigm of art historical investigations in the '60s and '70s, when a new generation of art specialists set out to counter art history's neglect and dismissal of African art. American art historians led the new, more serious academic inquiry into African art when three professors (Fraser at Columbia; Farris Thompson at Yale and Sieber at Indiana) initiated major changes in sub-Saharan art studies (Adams 1989: 60). In 1959 Sieber (cited in Adams 1989: 59), for instance, insisted that African art should be viewed as "a positive, integrated cultural manifestation". He eschewed otherising terminologies that emphasised the alien superstitiousness of African culture and instead couched the African's needs in practical terms any Westerner could identify with (the need for wealth, status, security etc). This functionalist influence relocated the focus on the African object as primarily an expression of religious beliefs, to an integration of the art

¹⁶² Adams (1989: 59) mentions the example of Janson, who included African art after prehistoric but before Egyptian art, even though the works illustrated dated from the late 19th century and early 20th century.

¹⁶³ In the 1970s it became common province for art historical scholars of African art to produce detailed comparative charts of the morphological stylistic attributes of different geographical regions. The usefulness of this method was challenged by the anthropologist Fernandez, who did research to prove the extensive blurring of style boundaries due to the peripatetic practices of many African carvers (Adams 1989: 63).

object with the social life of the community in question (Adams 1989: 61). The need to address past assumptions about African art meant that more emphasis was put on fieldwork. Anthropological methods were adopted, with the result that differences between the art historical and the anthropological approach to African material culture rapidly faded. The criticism levelled against anthropologists of this era (primarily cultural monadism and the tendency to study only 'pure, unchanged and static' cultures) can therefore also be levelled against the new generation of African art scholars of the '60s and '70s. While their work added invaluable correctives to common misconceptions about African art, their efforts to retrieve the remnants of a pre-colonial African 'authentic' culture were tantamount to the wilful obliteration of the colonial presence in Africa, and failed to contribute a theoretical model of social and cultural change that could accommodate Africa as an integral part of modern world history. The influence of this functionalist paradigm has been extremely pervasive, as Kasfir (1999: 89) suggests: "The idea that before colonialism most African societies were relatively isolated, internally coherent, and highly integrated has been such a powerful paradigm that we are obliged to retain it even when we now know that much of it is an oversimplified fiction."

Another obstacle to the incorporation of African art into the art historical canon was the predominant Western definition of art as "unique, complex, irreplaceable, nonreproducible" (Kleinbauer cited in Adams 1989: 57). As represented in 'surveys' of sub-Saharan African 'styles', African art appeared to be the same fundamental object "repeated endlessly by an anonymous person in a perishable material" (Adams 1989: 57). The African art object, which more often than not served some utilitarian function, thus did not fit comfortably into the canonical concept of art as a non-utilitarian product of a unique and visionary genius. The notion that art had to be free of worldly imperatives – the absolute opposite of a tool – rendered the inclusion of most African objects problematic: "The more the social functions of sub-Saharan sculpture were discussed in the '60s, the less the sculpture was defined by the uselessness that, increasingly since the late 18th century, has marked the category of 'art'" (Adams 1989:58).

The role of the individual artist was seldom explored since 'primitive' art was seen as representing collective ideas conveyed through communally developed modes of expression. Thus Rubin confidently proposed that "Tribal art expresses a collective rather than an individual sentiment" (1984: 36). It was generally assumed that the African artist was the mere

transmitter of communal values and had no or very limited freedom to do as he/she wished. The following editorial statement from a 1973 issue of *Réalités* captures this assumption:

The art of Africa is anonymous. Its products are emblems rather than reproductions of reality, symbols rather than copies. The reason for this lies in the nature of the civilizations that create them. They reflect communal societies, where the individual exists only as part of the group ... In Africa and Oceania, art ... has to offer the community mirror images in which it can recognize itself ... art is the cement that holds the community together; but for it the tribe would die (in Price 1989a: 61).¹⁶⁴

In addition, the 'tribal artist' was seen as severely hampered by the confines of custom and the tyranny of authoritarian social regulations. Kamer (1974), for instance, suggested that "In Africa there is no creative artist, as such ... He produces the masks and fetishes according to the needs of the moment, always on order of the dignitaries of the tribe and never following his inspiration of the moment" (in Price 1989: 59). The chapter headings of Hardy's *L'Art Nègre* ('The Tyranny of Natural Forces'; 'The Tyranny of the Social group'; 'The Sterility of Isolation') leave the reader in no doubt as to the paralysing restrictions imposed on the African artist. In a hardly veiled apologia for colonialism, Hardy suggests that "The Negro soul has remained immobile ... It is lost when left free, but capable of great and beautiful actions when it finds the master it needs" (in Torgovnick 1990: 98).

Since the 'primitive' artist was seen as the passive and unconscious transmitter of forms and techniques that took shape in the distant past, it was generally agreed that the researcher could learn by observing his/her methods, but had nothing to gain by interviewing him/her about the aesthetic aspects of the work. When the ethnographer Bohannan suggested in 1957 that the African artist and his African customers and viewing public were the key to decoding an African aesthetic, this suggestion was met with outrage, amusement and downright contempt by his contemporaries:

It never occurred to the ethnologists of the early 20th century that the primitive artist might be the key to understanding primitive art. They considered his efforts

¹⁶⁴ In the same issue, Huyghe proposed that "Little value is set on individuality, which in more developed societies plays an increasingly important role" (1973: 67). Also Darriulat (1973: 50): "Africa has no written records, it has no memory ... Africa and Oceania have no history. The story of primitive art is written in the present tense" (in Price 1989a: 61).

to be primarily craftwork and thus merely recorded his techniques, sources of designs, and other general cultural information (Fraser 1966: 244).

Instead of ascribing the 'anonymity' of the African artist to the careless collection practices of missionaries and colonial functionaries, the absence of names and contextual data in collections bred the mistaken conclusion that the identity and status of the artist were of no importance in Africa. Duerden, for instance, ascribes the African artist's 'anonymity' to his/her role as spiritual conduit:

The identity of the individual African sculptor has tended to become obscured, because he is manipulating forces which exist outside himself, so that once he has caused those forces to enter into the sculpture, he sinks into anonymity (1968: 16).

Rubin's (in)famous exhibition *Primitivism in Modern art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (1984), which launched the first large-scale critique of ethnocentric attitudes to the African art object, was criticised for, inter alia, displaying named and dated Modernist artworks alongside anonymous and undated African sculptures that were only labelled according to 'tribal' designation.¹⁶⁵

The idea that the African artist, and his/her audience, might be able to offer supra-cultural aesthetic insights was only seriously entertained in the '60s and '70s, when Fernandez (1966) and Thompson (1973) started investigating aesthetics from the perspective of the African artist and his/her audience (Sullenger 1979).¹⁶⁶ Cole, in his ground-breaking investigation into the Mbari house-building ritual of the Igbo (1969), offered serious challenges to Western ethnocentric preconceptions about art and aesthetics by detailing a social art activity in which cathartic process and transience were the most important dimensions of the work. Yet his research about Mbari houses remains caught in the ethnographic present and declines to situate the practice within a historical frame.

¹⁶⁵ This exhibition was also criticised for a facile equation of Modernist primitivism and 'the primitive' in which the artistic interaction between the West and the Rest is perceived as operating in one direction only. The Western artist, motivated by a quintessentially modern drive to innovation and individuality, is inspired by the raw energy of 'the primitive'; but the anonymous 'primitive' artist is relegated to a timeless 'ethnographic presence' and bound by the tyranny of tradition. This exhibition is critiqued by, inter alia, Clifford (1988), Torgovnick (1990), and Price (1989).

¹⁶⁶ Fernandez, under the influence of Durkheim, determined that the aesthetic preferences of the Fang were determined by a structural relationship between contrary elements such as male/female, right/left etc. Farris Thompson, on the other hand, determined a 'Yoruba aesthetic' through extensive interviews with Yoruba artists and informants, and concluded that balance (between mimesis and abstraction, coolness and heat, etc) was the most important Yoruba aesthetic criterion. The question of aesthetics as applied to African art is immensely complex and characterised by heated debate in the '70s and early '80s. See Sullinger (1979) for a detailed account of these debates.

The neglect of cultural and historical change and the occlusion of Western hegemonic influence in African art studies only began to be seriously addressed in the late '70s and '80s, when broader debates in the humanities (wrought by the linguistic turn) generated a new self-consciousness about method, theory, interpretation and disciplinary boundaries. The critique of ethnocentrism in anthropology aided this process of rewriting. The increasingly undeniable presence of new modern African art, often reflecting emerging national cultures and catering to flourishing new local and international markets, necessitated the demise of the 'one style one tribe' paradigm and compelled a more dynamic and incorporative definition of African art. This shift in focus was facilitated, I am convinced, not only by an increasing interest in globalisation and creolisation in other disciplines (such as literary theory), but also by the fact that the supply of 'traditional' African art dwindled to a trickle. I don't think it would be too cynical to suggest that the search for new African art markets was a major instrumental factor in the broadening of the African art canon in Western academe.

The above survey of responses to 'traditional' African art makes it clear that the oxymoron (to the modernist mind) of 'African art' constituted a hermeneutical challenge – but equally clearly it shows that interpretations were rapidly put in place that reified difference and created distance between the West and its African cultural Other. From this exposition of the major methodological and theoretical approaches to 'traditional' African art in the 20th century it is clear that, despite their great variety, certain pervasive ideas clustered around the topic: we see a tendency to perceive of African societies as unique cultural isolates that nonetheless reflect deep, universal structures; we see the perpetuation of evolutionist thinking even in methods that developed in opposition to evolutionism; we see that African societies are not perceived as part of history and that African art is thus caught in an ethnographic present; we deduce that the African artist is largely regarded as anonymous transmitter of a communal will and sensibility; and finally we gather that the artwork is either evaluated according to Western aesthetic criteria, or regarded as purely functional and hence not considered from an aesthetic perspective at all.

Only from the 1980s onwards did contemporary African art shows gain a foothold in European and American galleries, which gave a noticeable impetus to publication in this area. Before this, by and large, scholars took only minimal note of the major historic changes that swept the continent, and, when they took notice of artistic change at all, often lamented the passing of Africa's 'golden age'. Contemporary (colonial and postcolonial) objects were largely perceived as inauthentic, adulterated and degenerate. In 1960, for instance, Leuzinger

proposed that “what is produced [in contemporary Africa] is of most questionable value: works without any cultural roots or artistic content; elegant, perhaps, and ingenious, but at the same time plain, mannered, empty” (in Bascom 1976: 306). Similarly, Paulme (1962) suggested that: “All that was good in African sculpture has disappeared in these examples conceived solely for sale ... But the sculptures in which European influence is apparent are generally ugly and all sense of rhythm has disappeared” (1962: 149-50). This ‘decay’ was generally ascribed to the commercialisation of art because of the growing demands of the tourist art market: “Contemporary works are far from having the same value as the older ones which were made at leisure, without any consideration for monetary profit” (Paulme 1962: 151). Not only was this notion based on the false Romantic presupposition that ‘traditional’ African carvers never created for financial gain, but promoted a Eurocentric determination of artistic value as residing largely in the ‘rarity’ of the individual art object.

When change could no longer be ignored, *African Arts* concentrated largely on changes to the ‘traditional’ canon (from the 1970s onwards, *African Arts* started publishing increasingly more articles with titles prefaced by ‘continuity and change in ...’), and only very rarely ventured into the ‘adulterated’ realm of tourist, popular or academic African art.¹⁶⁷ But increasingly more scholars of African arts displayed interest in ‘hybrid’ African art forms that reflected the impact of colonialism and modernity on the African cultural arena. Even so, the incorporation of Western artistic materials and the appearance of modern art practices were most frequently derided as signs of corruption and acculturation. Modern African art was usually dismissed as inauthentic or disparaged as commercial. This glib dismissal ceased when, from the mid 1970s onwards (but especially in the ‘80s and ‘90s), the trickle of literatures on contemporary African art production swelled to become, if not a flood, then at least a substantial body of literature. In the late ‘80s the journal *Third Text* started providing radically critical insights not only into the production, but also the discursive reception of African art. The journal *Nka*, launched in 1994 by African diasporic intellectuals, was the first journal to focus exclusively on African interpretations of African cultural modernity.

Despite this very rapid emergence of both commercial and theoretical interest in modern African cultures, many of the paradigmatic assumptions that characterised literatures on ‘traditional’ African art continued to inform approaches to contemporary arts, as the following section demonstrates. Despite radical changes in the production and markets of African art, it is

¹⁶⁷ This resistance to modern African art could indicate some pressure from the journal’s advertisers, who were (and still are) largely traditional ‘primitive’ art dealers.

clear that the domain of African art continued to serve as laboratory where numerous modernist presuppositions about race, culture and the inevitability of progress could be 'tested'. The corpus of texts on African art – 'traditional' and 'modern' - can thus be decoded as a repository of some of the most salient and ubiquitous concerns of the modern West. Yet, as Adams (1989: 79) points out, some of the most serious challenges to the canonical understanding of African art emanated from authors who attempted to come to terms with 'new' African art. The persistence of certain colonial presuppositions *and* the appearance of the first significant challenges to such received ideas, indicate that modern African culture posited a hermeneutical challenge that served to shake the foundations of Western ideas about culture and Africa in the 20th century.

3.5 THE PROBLEM OF THE MODERN 'PRIMITIVE'¹⁶⁸

As was the case with my account of writings on 'traditional' African art, the following 'survey' of Western responses to modern African visual culture is intended to highlight the most prevalent approaches, categorisations and debates that can be said to characterise this field of enquiry¹⁶⁹. The field of modern African art and its reception in the West is immensely complex. A thorough account of this difficult and contentious terrain would necessitate a consideration of contextual factors such as colonisation and decolonisation; the rise of African nationalisms and state patronage; the establishment of new markets; the neo-colonial global economy; the establishment of art schools (most often by Westerners) and the concurrent academic art practice that arose with it; Western and local patronage; and continuously changing exhibition practices in Africa and the West. Discursive issues that would have to be taken into consideration would have to include the neo-colonial cultural relationship between the centre of Euro-America and the periphery of Africa in the postcolonial era; the rise of cultural resistance strategies in Africa such as Negritude, Pan-Africanism, Afrocentrism and Black Consciousness and how they interact with and appropriate aspects of modernist discourse; and a thorough investigation of ethnicity (real and invented) and how it dovetails with national identities. Again, I have to plead that such an in-depth inquiry is not possible within the limitations of this thesis. I must therefore once again remind the reader that the following account is perforce of a generalised nature; that it is not intended to be an

¹⁶⁸ This subsection owes much to my colleague Mario Pizarro's insights into the history of contemporary African art production, and to the extensive bibliography and course material he collated for my students.

¹⁶⁹ For an admirably thorough and very useful and intelligently annotated bibliography on virtually everything that has been written on contemporary African art, I recommend Stanley's *Modern African Art: a basic reading list* [online] (1998, updated 2003).

exhaustive 'review' of literatures on contemporary African art nor an attempt at correcting their glaring omissions. I concentrate mainly on the broad discursive and epistemological traits that continue colonial presuppositions about African culture; and on the establishment of new strategies of Othering to deal with modern Africa. I have by and large had to confine more detailed discussion to footnotes. This 'survey' focuses mainly on writings about modern 'academic' African art,¹⁷⁰ since the point of this thesis is ultimately to deconstruct South African discourse around this phenomenon. I do however briefly refer to writings about 'informal' African art¹⁷¹ since the taxonomic distinctions made between different modes and markets are in themselves ideologically significant and because more recent general accounts of 20th-century African art incorporate both academic and informal art production. Taxonomies are, however, only thoroughly unpacked in the next chapter, where I refer to issues and definitions raised in these texts in more depth in order to clarify and unpack aspects of South African art writing.

The first texts devoted exclusively to modern Pan-African art production emerged in the late '60s.¹⁷² It is significant that these and later general accounts of modern African art, like those on 'traditional' African culture, focus predominantly on Sub-Saharan art, which, one assumes, is regarded as 'real Africa' since the Arabian and Muslim presence is less tangible there.¹⁷³ These texts were written by Westerners actively engaged in art tuition in Africa – which is significant because it illustrates the degree to which Western cultural brokerage was not only instrumental in the dissemination of information about this phenomenon, but in the very genesis and development of a modern academic art praxis on the continent. I focus on the first two texts (McEwen and Beier) in some detail, since these established foundational theoretical grounds which later publications either repeated verbatim or embellished upon. Given that modern African art constituted a brand new domain in the mid 20th century, it is perhaps not surprising that, for decades, later writings displayed a remarkable homogeneity in their

¹⁷⁰ I use the term 'academic' loosely to refer to the artistic products of formal tuition (schools, universities, colleges, workshops).

¹⁷¹ Art created for community markets and local businesses – such as funerary art, sign painting and popular painting.

¹⁷² The earliest publications dealt with particular countries or schools: namely a book on Ghanaian sculpture by Kofi (1964), and Beier's book of Nigerian Modern Art (1960). One of the first exhibitions to showcase modern African art was *Contemporary African Art* at the Camden Arts Centre, London in 1969.

¹⁷³ In a review of the exhibition/publication *Africa Explores* I questioned the curator Susan Vogel's exclusions of North and South Africa: "Her motives for excluding North Africa are that 'other art traditions' prevailed there (meaning, probably, a greater Arab/Muslim influence). What does this imply? That the centuries old Muslim presence in Africa is still 'foreign', or that modern North Africans are not black enough? That Pan-African generalisations can be made about the remainder of Africa with absolute impunity? That the modern nation state is simply a superficial 'Westernism' which barely disguises the inherent and essential Africanness of Africans? ... It seems to me that, once again, it is a case of desperately seeking Africa" (Van Robbroeck 1994: 68).

dependency upon the earliest publications. It perhaps also indicates that modern African art did not share the credentials of 'traditional' African art studies and was not regarded as a field of serious academic inquiry. Certainly the authors who chose to adopt this field tended to be art practitioners, teachers or amateur researchers rather than tenured academics at reputable universities. McEwen,¹⁷⁴ for instance, ran a workshop for artists at the National Gallery in (then) Rhodesia. McEwen berates Western art schools for inculcating a mediocre and stale imitation of 'international'¹⁷⁵ art among their students (1967 & 1966). He advocates his workshop approach instead, which he claims does not interfere with the natural talents of students and which allows the innate African vitality of their work to flourish. McEwen is not only disparaging of 'Western inspired' art, but also of the commercialism and mass production of tourist art (which he calls 'airport art').

McEwen's text introduces a number of themes that were frequently repeated in subsequent writing on modern African art – including in the South African writings I deconstruct in the next chapter. His thoughts on 'modern' African art are clearly imbedded in the colonial discourses on 'traditional' African art that were prevalent at the time. We see the implication of evolutionist thinking in the assumption that 'traditional' Africa is doomed to extinction and that it must necessarily yield to the next stage in cultural development. This assumption rests on an understanding of tradition as static and grounded in ancient and immutable social and religious practices - the 'then' of extinct tradition has to be superseded by the 'now' of modernity. But it is made amply clear that this new modern phenomenon is distinctly different to European Modernism in so far as it is a 'true' primitive outpouring. The essentialist implication is that the African possesses an innate, uniquely African creativity which will manifest as a distinctly and recognisably African art.¹⁷⁶ The spontaneous creativity of the African is threatened by white interference and tutelage, which can at best lead to facile imitation and boring and derivative art. Attempts on the part of the Western teacher to induce development through the intervention of active teaching will lead to facile imitation; a pretentious and contrived pseudo-Modernism. Western influence, which contains all the repressive norms of unnatural civilisation, is bound to have a stultifying effect on the spontaneous creativity and essential Africanness of the African artist.

¹⁷⁴ McEwen studied art at the Sorbonne and was deeply immersed in Modernist (and primitivist) movements and intellectual circles in Paris in the '30s. He fled to Africa during World War 2.

¹⁷⁵ It is significant that the term 'international' was – and still is - frequently used to refer exclusively to the advanced capitalist / industrialised world. The excluded 'other' of this international world is the archaic anomaly of the third world.

¹⁷⁶ In a publication on his sculpture workshop, McEwen (1967) describes his students as "mystically inclined and armed with endless patience ... with an inherent belief in ancestor worship and the realm of the unseen".

Paradoxically, however, McEwen's writings and workshop practices suggest that the development towards a new African art will not happen without the facilitation of the Western cultural broker, who channels and directs this African creativity towards its 'true, authentic' realisation. In addition, within the Western artistic paradigm that McEwen took for granted, it was inconceivable that 'authentic art' could be produced for purely financial gain – hence the crass commercialism of 'airport art' for sale to Western tourists excluded it from serious consideration as 'authentic art'. 'Real art' could only be the sincere product of an individual artist who never produced the same object more than once. The distinctly Western ethnocentric concept of 'true art' as non-functional and non-commercial determines what is worthy of critical investigation.

Arguably the most significant modernist discursive characteristic of all, however, is McEwen's reluctance to perceive his own tutelary interventions as Western interference or patronage.¹⁷⁷ His ability to recognise, nurture and realise 'real' talent – to bring the innate African creativity to fruition, so to speak – is never in question. Nor is his ability to distinguish between the authentic and the inauthentic. As a liberal art teacher in Africa, McEwen was probably well meaning, but the tone of paternalistic omniscience unmistakably evokes him as the transcendent Enlightenment subject in absolute command of his object.¹⁷⁸ In addition, McEwen's establishment of a sculptural praxis that he termed 'Shona art' (despite the fact that numerous artists who participated in this 'school' were from Malawi, Angola and Mozambique) amounted to an invented tradition which rested on a largely fictional ethnicity (Pisarro 2005). This overdetermination of ethnicity perpetuated the cultural monadism common in contemporary accounts of 'traditional' African art and had the additional unfortunate consequence of conflating ethnic and national identities.¹⁷⁹ McEwen's writing sets the trend for subsequent

¹⁷⁷ McEwen, who was influenced by Jung, proposed that all cultures had a 'collective unconscious' that needed to be awakened. According to Pisarro (2004) "he was promoting a particular paradigm of authenticity where external, imported influences are apparently eliminated and where a supposedly pure culture and tradition are revealed".

¹⁷⁸ In a text published later that same year Beier (1968: 89) affirms the importance of McEwen's cultural brokerage: "Frank McEwen, trying to create new artists in the cultural desert of Rhodesia, could be compared to an Israeli farmer fertilising the Negev". Beier, whose text is considerably more humble and self-reflexive than McEwen's, nonetheless does not dispute McEwen's rights and ability to act as arbiter and judge: "McEwen's second influence was that of critic. He set high standards and condemned pictures that did not work, making the artists overpaint them" (1968: 89).

¹⁷⁹ The considerable mythology and reputation surrounding 'Shona sculpture' was opportunistically appropriated by Zanu PF as part of its (deliberately divisive) post-independence nation-building strategy. 'Shona sculpture' was spuriously touted by Zanu PF as the contemporary continuation of the traditions established at Great Zimbabwe. See Cousins (1991) on the appropriation and commercialisation of Zimbabwe stone sculpture.

publications on modern African art by interpreting these objects as the product of ethnic cultural essences.

Most of the publications of the '60s, '70s and '80s perpetuated a-historical, non-materialistic and non-reflexive 'analyses' that entirely eschewed investigation of the particular material exigencies (poverty, cultural genocide, unemployment, industrialisation, urbanisation, emerging markets), or the ideological contexts of production (involvement of state and ideological apparatuses, the influence of the colonial state, the rise of African nationalisms). I discuss Beier's *Contemporary Art in Africa* (1968)¹⁸⁰ in some depth since it can be regarded as the first significant monograph on modern African art, and because it introduced a set of interpretative strategies that were to become virtually axiomatic in subsequent publications on the topic.¹⁸¹ Beier attempts a survey of contemporary sub-Saharan African art by concentrating on the various schools and workshops where non-traditional artists received their training.¹⁸² This text is notable in that it displays an unusually high degree of self-reflexivity for the time. Beier eschews the authorial arrogance of McEwen by pointing out, in the introduction, that his account cannot be regarded as anything more than a very personal, selective and subjective view. He comments extensively on his own experience in Oshogbo, Nigeria, which offered the ideal situation, according to Beier, for a European to live in an African community, but "not as an anthropologist who studies a foreign way of life" (1968: 89). He describes Oshogbo as a hybrid and dynamic cultural hothouse where foreignness is not only accommodated but appreciated.¹⁸³ His portrayal of contemporary, newly independent Africa as a rewarding place for cultural exchange is a much less uni-directional account of the European presence in Africa than most contemporary anthropological studies. In addition, it is predicated on an acknowledgement of coevalness that flows, in part, from the fact that Beier set up permanent residence in Nigeria and formed close intellectual and creative alliances with some of Africa's most remarkable contemporary minds.

¹⁸⁰ Beier uses 'modern' for all cultural products of the 20th century, but 'contemporary' to refer to only practitioners of a western-derived art (ie what Nzegwu (1999) calls 'Euromodernism'). These and other terminological curiosities will be deconstructed in the next chapter.

¹⁸¹ Beier did publish a much shorter text, *Art in Nigeria* in 1960, when, according to him, 'modern art' was only beginning in Africa. Beier, of German descent, is better known for his publications on postcolonial African literature. He was a member of the Mbari group (founded in 1961) in Ibadan, which included, inter alia, Wole Soyinka and Ezekiel Mphahlele.

¹⁸² The importance of schools in the establishment of a modern academic practice in Africa is clear from all the first accounts of this phenomenon. Mount (1973:187-88) provides a comprehensive list of workshops and schools of sub-Saharan Africa in the first decades of independence. Pizarro (2005) points out that the schools of the Maghreb – the largely Islamic countries bordering the Mediterranean – are never included in such surveys despite the fact that they may have been the first African countries to engage with Western modernism. The reason for their exclusion is probably because the Arabian presence discounts them as 'true African' countries.

¹⁸³ The Oshogbo school of art was established in the early 60's by expatriates Ulli Beier, Susanne Wenger and Georgine Beier.

Most notable, however, is a long ruminative debate in the introduction about Western imperialism and the nature of cultural change. Here Beier attacks Western arrogance and prejudice by tracing Western attitudes to Africans from the Renaissance onwards. He exposes, *inter alia*, the modernist conviction of European superiority as an excuse to exploit Africa and to justify the horrors of the slave trade. This modernity critique is followed by the observation, in keeping with a post-World War 2 distrust in the Enlightenment project, that “we have lost faith in the superiority of our own culture”, and that “the empire builder has lost faith in his *mission civilisatrice*”. He concludes with a note of alarm about the implications of Western universalism: “we are beginning to see that we are pressing the entire world into one prefabricated mould” (1968: 4-5).

Beier’s book bears out Adams’ observation that the first literatures on the newly emerging phenomenon of modern African art challenge some of the orthodoxies of ‘traditional’ art studies. In the preface he comments on the profusion of books on traditional African art that create the impression that artistic expression is a thing of the past in Africa. His book mitigates, albeit with some ambiguity, against the familiar lament about the demise of art in Africa.¹⁸⁴ Although Beier (1968: 3) affirms that traditional practices are dying out, he insists that the decline of African tradition has opened up opportunities for fresh artistic developments that deserve scrutiny. Commenting on the rapid growth of an African cultural modernity, Beier points out that Brown, in her 1966 directory of modern African artists, already listed more than 300 practising artists and that the field has been expanding daily.¹⁸⁵

Beier’s interpretation of cultural change marks him as a product of his times. His theorisation of the demise of traditional African art suggests that he was influenced by the sociological cultural model prevalent after World War 2 that perceived cultures as biological organisms prone to inevitable processes of genesis, growth and decay. He thus ascribes the decline of traditional African art not just to the impact of colonialism and industrialisation (which he does acknowledge), but also to a natural deterioration. Citing the example of the decline of Benin’s cultural traditions, Beier concludes that “little attention has been focussed on the inherent

¹⁸⁴ Beier (1968: 3) quotes Fagg in this regard: “we are in the death of all that is best in African Art”.

¹⁸⁵ Brown considerably expanded a directory on Africa’s modern artists that was launched by the Harmon Foundation in 1961 (see Stanley 1998/2003).

weakness of the African cultures themselves or on the fact that many were degenerate before the decisive European contact" (1968: 3).¹⁸⁶

Beier's discussion of modern African art is moreover imbedded in typical high Modernist assumptions of the late '50s and '60s. His survey only encompasses artists trained (at workshops, schools or universities) in Western media and methods. His dismissal of popular and tourist art suggests that these modern African cultural phenomena were not worthy of academic investigation.¹⁸⁷ This tendency to look only at what Beier calls 'intellectual art' (in itself a significantly prejudicial appellation), suggests the extent to which a High Modernist cultural paradigm informed art historical selections at the time. Nzegwu (1999: 393) suggests that Beier selected artists to represent his notion of the 'contemporary' according to Eurocentric Modernist criteria: "These are artistic individualism, the receipt of Western European artistic education, and international (i.e., in the West) exhibitions." The first attempts to come to terms with the vital (and much more prolific) practices of tourist and popular arts in Africa only emerged in the late 1970s, when the rapid ascendancy of Cultural Studies programmes at Euro-American universities contributed to a global re-evaluation of popular culture.¹⁸⁸ Beier thus takes for granted, like McEwen, the Western definition of art which sees it as the product of gifted individuals who produce once-off artworks bearing the stylistic stamp of their particular unique talent and/or their ethnic/national affiliation.

Beier's chapter titles indicate hermeneutical devices that were repeated in most subsequent publications on modern African art. Chapter 1, titled 'Between Two Worlds', introduces the notion that the modern African artist does not occupy a fully modern space, but that he/she is caught in a no-man's land between two incompatible – if not mutually exclusive – life worlds. According to Beier (1968: 15):

They are traditional artists who, through unusual strength of personality and fortunate circumstances, have been able to reach out beyond the world in which

¹⁸⁶ Since the earliest colonial encounter, the art of Benin elicited numerous debates about the origins and nature of African art, and writings about this phenomenon serve as a very revealing repository of Western ethnocentric projections about Africa, Africans and African cultural production in general. These debates – and their contemporary manifestation – are brilliantly deconstructed by Coombes in *Reinventing Africa* (1994).

¹⁸⁷ See, for instance, his comment about tourist art (1968: 12): "This 'airport art', as it was labelled by McEwen, is indeed hideous because it is carried out without conviction or care and simply repeats the empty forms of tradition". He notes the "new exuberant art forms" to be found in the domain of popular urban arts, but does not investigate them except to suggest that: "These popular forms heralded the coming of the intellectual African artist" (1968: 13).

¹⁸⁸ One of the first texts to engage popular culture in Africa was Graburn's *Ethnic and Tourist Art: Cultural Expressions from the 4th World* of 1976.

they grew up, have succeeded in working for a wider, largely European audience without becoming cheap, and in their work have given expression to the world of transition in which they live.

The evolutionist implications are clear. The modern African artist is an exceptional 'traditional' artist (hence authentically African) who, through the possession of admirable and unusual traits (strength of personality and an adventurous nature - hence the proactive individualism that marks him¹⁸⁹ as a potential artist in the Western understanding of the term) manages to escape the narrow confines of the African life world to embrace the wide world as represented by the West. In doing so, the modern African artist embarks on a journey towards full modernity – he is travelling the path of transition from tradition (the past, collectivity, Africa) to modernity (the present, individuation, the West). The fact that he occupies a transitional space, however, means that he has not yet attained all the gifts promised by modernity.

Beier's Chapter 3, titled 'In Search of Identity' introduces another theme (related to the 'two-worlds' theme) that was endlessly reified in subsequent literatures on modern African art. This theme can briefly be summarised as follows: since the modern African artist occupies a no-man's land between incompatible life worlds, it stands to reason that he struggles to reconcile two conflicting kinds of subjectivity. His artistic experiments with Western modes of expression have opened up new subjective modalities: "The artists [have] become self-conscious and open minded, deliberately exposing themselves to the influence and impact of two cultures" (Beier 1968: 48). In the tradition of the Enlightenment, modern subjectivity comprises open-mindedness and the achievement of self-consciousness – it introduces the element of choice and conscious deliberation. By implication, African subjectivity is the other side of the coin – it resides in a collective unconscious and it is circumscribed by strict and narrow rules and conventions. The African artist's awakening into an (almost) modern subjectivity, constitutes a crisis of identity.¹⁹⁰ His pursuit of new expressive forms is nothing less than evidence of his search for a new identity, and of his aspiration to achieve the full individuation (or, in Hegel's understanding of this process, maturation) promised by Western modernity.¹⁹¹ The artist is

¹⁸⁹ Note that I use the masculine pronoun here because the abstract imaginary of 'the modern African artist' was invariably conceived of as male.

¹⁹⁰ This crisis is so severe, Beier suggests, that it has occasioned a kind of artistic catatonia: "The impact of Europe and the break-up of tribal society can be compared to a stunning blow that knocked the African unconscious for a while. Now, after a generation or two of artistic blackout he is awakening from a trance, the world looks new and changed to him and we watch him trying to find his way out" (1968: 169).

¹⁹¹ The concept of 'two worlds, two identities' informed the titles of numerous publications on modern African art. Kennedy's *New Currents, Ancient Rivers: Contemporary African Artists in a Generation of Change* (1992), for

represented as, on the one hand, the uniquely gifted individual who, through his particular brave and visionary perspective, participates in the great emancipatory project of cultural Modernism. On the other hand, paradoxically, the artist is represented as the passive and helpless recipient of the inexorable historical force of modernity, which sweeps him off his feet and casts him into a vortex of crisis and cultural dependency on the Western teacher. The loss of the safe confines of authoritarian tradition generates an existential crisis that lends the modern African artist's creative expression an edge of pathos and anxiety.

The assumption that African modernism constitutes an example of a 'universal' (read: Western) modernism, as Nzegwu (1999: 392) points out, is based on "the teleological conception of history that seduces proponents of Euromodernism into thinking that there is only one path and one homogenous view of modernity". Nzegwu demonstrates that Beier's text, like most Western approaches to African cultural modernity, assumes that the 'modern' in African art (because of superficial resemblances) is of the same fundamental order as the 'modern' in European art. Nzegwu's criticism holds only partly true. Although most discourses on African cultural modernity assume that all modernities develop along the same lines and manifest the same fundamental forms, there is never any doubt that Africa's cultural modernity is quintessentially different - in terms both of form and content - to European Modernism. The art historical imperative to regard the art object as sign of a particular (though constantly evolving) national, racial or ethnic identity, precludes the possibility of regarding African Modernism as identical to European Modernism. Preziosi (1998: 513) points out that art history, in its attempts to locate a suitable place for all the varied arts of the world, assigns particular importance to art as a signifier of difference:

For every people and ethnicity, for every class and gender, for every individual no less than for every race, there may be projected a legitimate 'art' with its own unique spirit and soul; its own history and prehistory; its own future potential; its own respectability; and its own style of representational adequacy.

It is true, however, that the evolutionist art historical assumption that cultural Modernism is the inevitable outflow of a universal progressive trajectory of development frees the researcher from the need to take into consideration the very particular contextual factors, and the ambiguous and complex subjectivities these gave rise to, in a politically fraught and ideologically convoluted colonial and post-colonial cultural arena. The sweeping assumption

instance, is premised on the divided contemporary African artist. The metaphor of the Ancient River as carrier of primordial and constant African ancestral energy, and New Currents as representative of the innovative, dynamic impetus provided by the West serves as telling example of this 'two worlds' construct.

that all cultural modernities share the same fundamental ontology derives in part from the High Modernist conviction that pure form is a universal language that cuts across geographic and linguistic barriers. The tension between universalism and essentialist difference, it will be shown, is also evident in writings on modern black South African art.

Beier's neglect of the particularities of context of early African Modernism also reflects, according to Nzegwu (1999: 395 – 396), prevalent economic theories of the time:

In the economic development climate of the 1960s in which he was writing, the conventional wisdom of the fashionable modernization theories were that Africa needed to be modernized and constructively placed on the path of progress, if it was ever to develop ... As a result, Beier's deployment of European creative practices and experiences as a panacea for artistic development in Nigeria was then seen, not as the hegemonic move that it was, but as both beneficent and progressive.

Beier's selection of artists, Nzegwu (1999: 393) demonstrates, is based on a "German expressionist conception of art that deploys the principles of a European artistic practice: lack of inhibitions, absence of preconceived ideas, and free, colourful, and imaginative art". It is significant that Beier does not even refer to 'pioneer' modern artists such as Onabulu whose pointed concerns with social and political issues and whose stylistic naturalism precluded him from Beier's Euromodernist conception of contemporary African art.¹⁹² Beier's bias towards expressionist-looking art is surely not coincidental. In the first instance, he was German and particularly influenced by German Expressionism. More significantly, however, is the fact that the German Expressionists, perhaps more than any other European avant-garde movement, derived their particularly virulent primitivism primarily from African art. Beier, in making his selections, affirms the primitivist conviction of German Expressionists that African art (traditional or modern) represented the pure, untrammelled and spontaneous expression of the 'primitive' ur-consciousness.¹⁹³ Nzegwu claims that because these African Modernist works *appear* like European modernism, they are interpreted as "systematically developing along the preordained track laid out by European artists". Thus, Nzegwu points out, the vital social and cultural influences that are particular to Nigeria are underestimated, and no consideration is

¹⁹² A similar process of omission, as will be shown, happened in South Africa.

¹⁹³ Jegede (in Abiodun, Drewal & Pemberton 1994: 218) notes that Beier, like McEwen, discouraged too much Western-style education for African artists at Oshogbo: "in the opinion of Beier, his students were home-grown rustics who, rather than become ... sick through 'enough education', had remained sealed within their cultural precincts ..."; he adds that Beier compared them favourably with the self-consciousness of academic Nigerian artists.

given to how these artists have “appropriately contemporized and extended their indigenous artistic tradition” (1999: 393). One could add that Beier (and subsequent authors) not only perceive African Modernism as a regional version of an ‘international’ Modernist art spirit led by the West, but that these authors simultaneously also regard African Modernism as of a distinctly *transitional* nature which implies that it has not yet ‘arrived’ at a mature realisation. In addition this universalism is also undercut by a pervasive and contradictory sense that African Modernism actually partakes of a unique essence that distinguishes it as authentically African.

A number of texts dealing with modern African art as a Pan-African phenomenon would follow in Beier’s wake.¹⁹⁴ As mentioned before, however, these Pan-African surveys seldom included North Africa and increasingly came to exclude South Africa, where continued white hegemonic domination precluded, one presumes, full membership of the African continent. The tendency to equate ‘authentic’ Africa with sub-Saharan black Africa reveals the extent to which Africa continued to operate as trope rather than geographical entity in ethnographic writing of the 20th century. Furthermore, the attempt to produce Pan-African surveys indicates the assumption of an African essence that served as a common and unifying bond between all the diverse cultures, language groups, nations and individual artists of the continent. Beier problematises this notion. Referring to the term ‘Neo-African’ (coined by Jahn) to describe modern African art, Beier cautions that this term is based on the African artist’s Negritudist romanticisation of a Pan-African identity that is premised on a “woolly quality of Africanness [that] was never clearly defined” and that amounted to a “deliberate mystification” that “rested on the assumption that cultures as diverse as say, the Dogon of Mali, the Yoruba of Nigeria and the Zulu of South Africa had certain elements in common which were *African* and which distinguished them from cultures in other parts of the world” (1968: 165-167). In ascribing the genesis of modern African art to this Negritudist impulse, Beier paradoxically affirms the existence of a common ethos, style and content for modern African art. While Beier’s questioning of the mythological nature of a Pan-African identity is exceptional and insightful for its time, it has to be noted that he credits the fabrication of Africa as trope to the Negritudists rather than to the West. Nor does his scepticism about such an African essence prevent him from identifying Pan-African stylistic and iconographic traits in the art he selects for discussion. It can be argued that Beier’s text, like all subsequent Pan-African surveys that protest the diversity of art on the continent, nonetheless presupposes a collective cultural essence shared by all black Africans. Thus, although Beier concludes that: “We can speak of a

¹⁹⁴ I do not discuss all these publications since they by and large repeat the sentiments and assumptions raised by McEwen and Beier. Examples of such sweeping surveys include Fosu (1986 and 1993) and Gaudibert (1991).

modern art *in* Africa, but so far these artists are too individualistic to be pigeon-holed as 'African artists'" (1968:169), his own attempt to uncover commonalities and identify shared characteristics and traits belies this acknowledgement of diversity. Partly this ambiguity is the inevitable by-product of the modernist urge to classify and contain; but perhaps more fruitfully, it may be interpreted as the attempt to reconcile the Modernist perception of 'true art' as the product of a unique individual, with the equally compelling desire to reify all African artists as inherently and collectively different and Other. Most emphatically, however, it demonstrates how entrenched and unshakeable the *concept* of Africa has been since the Enlightenment. Neither the continent's diversity of geographical characteristics, language groups, religions, ethnicities, and social and cultural practices in the pre-colonial era; nor its proliferation of nations in the post-colonial era, has been able to eradicate this relentless trope.

Mount's *African Art: the Years Since 1920* (first published in 1973), distinguishes between 'mission-inspired art' (not wholly successful or realised), 'souvenir art' (commercial and derivative), 'traditional art' (rapidly disappearing) and 'the new painting and sculpture', which, in an echo of Beier, he regards as the most aesthetically promising, and which he interprets as inspired by Africans' desire "to become part of the larger, modern world" (1989: 187). His Pan-African survey of this phenomenon, to which he devotes the bulk of his writing, includes artists as diverse as the South African Sekoto, the Nigerian Enwonwu and the Ghanain Ampofo in one sweeping discussion, without consideration of their national origin or the exigencies of their particular socio-political contexts. Rather, commonalities are established between these artists by comparing their work, predictably, to the two cultural poles of Africa and the West:

The majority of these historically important art-school trained artists are, however, eclectic in style, combining both African and Western traits. Enwonwu, Sekoto and Ampofo, for example, frequently use the characteristic figure proportions and treatment of facial features found in specific African traditional art styles. ... The composition of figures and their relationship in space are but a few of the stylistic similarities to Western art in the paintings of Ewonwu, Sekoto, and Antubam; and the sculpture of Ampofo displays a greater realism in the handling of figure parts than is seen in traditional sculpture (Mount 89: 190).

This minute dissection of the Modernist African artwork to establish exactly which of its features derive from which of the two cultural extremes was to remain part of most subsequent discourses and was particularly prevalent in South African art writing, as will be

shown in the next chapter. Like McEwen and Beier's publications, Mount's survey does not include contemporary popular art such as shop signs, funerary art, murals and mass produced paintings with didactic or religious messages for the local market. Clearly he did not regard these phenomena - created by 'amateur' artists for local consumption rather than by Western trained artists for European consumption - as worthy of consideration. Like his precursors, Mount clearly saw 'academic' art as the only worthy successor of 'traditional' art.¹⁹⁵

These earliest general accounts of modern African art were products of a High Modernist conception of art. This view entailed an unquestioned belief in, inter alia, the universal communicability of art and unlimited confidence in the notion that Western contemporary Modernism was the axis of an international progressive artistic language. Well-meaning teachers such as Beier and McEwen did not for a moment, despite their primitivist protestations about the need to keep African art 'authentic' and 'uncontaminated', regard their own teaching practices as the hegemonic imposition of an artistic sameness that normativised modern Western art as 'universal' and 'international'.

But if modernism can be described as the fetishisation of sameness, as McEvelley (1992: 11) suggests, then post-modernism fetishises difference. While the earliest Pan-African surveys of modern African cultural output concentrated exclusively on 'academic' art, later (post-modern) surveys attempted to come to terms with Africa's cultural diversity and widely divergent markets. The broadening of the canon of African art worthy of Western study started with the exploration of tourist art, which began in the late 1970s.¹⁹⁶ Later Pan-African surveys widened their categorical spectrum to include popular culture produced for local commerce. As the European market opened its doors to the 'quirky' and 'naïve' products of the major African cities, interest in the 'pseudo-Western' art of the workshops, galleries and schools waned (limited as it was to begin with) in favour of the 'fresh' and more 'authentically African' art of the streets. The '80s and '90s thus saw a proliferation of contentious exhibitions and attendant publications on informal African art.¹⁹⁷ The New York exhibition *Africa Explores* of 1991 - an

¹⁹⁵ An exception to this rule is an article on informal art for local consumption by Oledzki (1974) which explores, inter alia, rural homes, murals, bus paintings and bar paintings.

¹⁹⁶ See Graburn (1976); followed by Jules-Rosette (1986). Very interesting and valuable research has been conducted recently on African mass production of objects for Western consumption - see in particular Steiner (1994 and 1991), Marcus and Myers (1995), and Phillips and Steiner (1999).

¹⁹⁷ For instance, *L'art Naïf Africain*, 1987, Paris; *Magiciens de la Terre*, 1989, Paris; *Africa Explores*, New York 1991; *Africa Now: Jean Pigozzi Collection* (travelling exhibition) 1991; *An Inside Story: African Art of Our Time* 1991, Tokyo; *Jean Pigozzi Contemporary Art Collection*, 1992, London. The very influential *Magiciens de la Terre*

ambitious attempt to survey and categorise the great variety of visual culture produced in Africa during the 20th century - once again concentrated on Central and West Africa. The attendant hefty publication posited five categories for all African art: Traditional, New Functional, Urban, International and Extinct, but devoted the bulk of the illustrations to informal urban art, which, after the 1989 exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*, had gripped the European imagination and drawn the attention and cheque books of major collectors. Exhibitions such as these have been criticised for celebrating diversity in the guise of a post-modern pluralism which occludes the true aim of these collections – to simultaneously over-articulate the difference of African art while hypocritically positing a spurious equality between first and third world cultures.¹⁹⁸ Coombes (1998: 491) suggests that exhibitions that foreground hybridity as a condition of 'post-coloniality' tend to portray the world's cultural products as part of "a contented global village". Exhibitions such as *Magiciens de la Terre* select 'exotic' third world art that strike the European eye as fundamentally different, and significantly ignore the 'proximate Other' of diasporan art.

The categories proposed in sweeping 'post-modern' surveys such as *Africa Explores*, like most attempts at all-encompassing taxonomies, are dubious in their ideological implications and too permeable and overlapping to do justice to the complexities of the artistic production of an entire continent, as John Picton (1991) pointed out in his review of the publication.¹⁹⁹

Since the 1990s, intelligentsia of the African diaspora have contributed significantly to discourse around contemporary African art production, both as curators of major international exhibitions and as critics and writers.²⁰⁰ These exhibitions and writings respond critically to the

elicited criticism for celebrating a false post-modern equality between first world and third world art and for selecting mainly African artists that conformed to a Western ethnocentric conception of 'African authenticity' (see, for instance, Araeen (1989), Buchloh (1989), Heartney (1989), Kasfir (1997), Poppi (1991), Michaud (1989)). Other exhibitions, such as *Africa Explores*, raised questions about curatorial choices, categorisation and the unquestioned Western gaze (see, among others, Picton (1992); Kasfir (1992); Oguibe (1993) and Van Robbroeck (1994)). Additional publications on informal African art include Graburn (1976), Barber (1987), Brett (1987), and Magnin and Soullou (1996). Magnin and Soullou provoked similar criticism to that levelled against exhibitions such as *Magiciens* in that their disdain for formal art-school trained artists and celebration of unschooled artists could be interpreted as a reification of Western romantic, primitivist assumptions about African purity and authenticity (see Wright, B (1996)).

¹⁹⁸ Araeen (1989: 11), in his critique of *Magiciens de la Terre*, puts it as follows: "The failure of *Magiciens de la Terre* to take into consideration the present historical and material conditions of other cultures, their aspirations and struggles to enter into the modern world with all its conflicts and contradictions, and what they have actually achieved within these limitations, is to mystify the production of art and to remove it from the question of power and privileges. By this failure it has defeated its own stated objective to provide a viable framework which would break the distinctions and allow a dialogue among the diversity of contemporary art from all over the world."

¹⁹⁹ The implications of categorisation in discourse on contemporary African art production will be dealt with in more depth in the next chapter.

²⁰⁰ An article that engages the grounds for this repositioning is Enwezor's *Redrawing the Boundaries: towards a new African Art Discourse* (1994). A forum for African arts was established by, inter alia, Hassan, Enwezor and

Western ethnographic gaze that favours the untutored and apparently 'naïve' visuality of informal African art, which, according to these writers, denies critical intellectual African art practitioners access to the international art arena and reifies Western stereotypes about Africa and Africans. In both their writings and their curatorial practice, these diasporan Africans have relocated interest to the cutting edge avant-garde art of the continent.²⁰¹ Their selections favour conceptual art and installations, and their writings situate African art practice not only within the complex problematics and debates of postcolonial and diasporan Africa, but position it firmly within the competitive international art arena. It can be argued that Pan-Africanism continues to underpin these writings, but it is significant that this strategic Pan-Africanism is broadened to incorporate artists of African descent in the diaspora. The term 'Africana' is an inclusive neologism which proposes a global ethos and commonality between all peoples of African descent. This can be described as a kind of counter essentialism, which carries (albeit ambiguously) Negritudist implications of shared Africanness. Such counter essentialism is, however, clearly strategic and attacks the social and discursive practices of the neo-colonial global order, rather than reifying a 'genetic Africanness' as the basis of its commonality. The strategic essentialism of these writers encourages peoples of African descent to forge solidarity in the face of universal discrimination and oppression. Since their contributions fall outside the time span of this thesis, I do not discuss them in any detail here. In my conclusion, however, where I briefly consider the (in)effectiveness of their strategies for overcoming or transcending modernist/colonialist binaries and stereotypes, I raise one or two questions around the significant discursive shift they occasioned.

In addition to these African voices, more critical Pan-African surveys were produced in the late 20th century under the influence of postcolonial theory. Kasfir's *Contemporary African Art* (1999), for instance, adopts a contextualist perspective that takes into account historical and ideological factors as well as particular socio-political circumstances. Kasfir's critical 'history' considers broad contextual and ideological themes such as patronage and brokerage; culture as nationalism; and art as commodity. Once again, however, North Africa is excluded from this account and Kasfir's protestations of heterogeneity aside, the Pan-African nature of the themes - which often cut across language, ethnic and national boundaries - still assumes a common

Oguibe "to support and propagate the work of African artists and produce knowledge to ensure that they take their deserved place within the spaces and narratives of international contemporary art" (Hassan & Oguibe (2001: 8). See also Hassan and Dadi (2002). The journals *Third text* and *Nka* also constitute fora for a more critical engagement with contemporary African culture.

²⁰¹ Exhibitions include Hassan's *Gendered Visions: The Art of Contemporary Africana Women Artists* (1996); Enwezor's *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994* (2001); Hassan and Oguibe's *Authentic/Ex-centric* (African component of the 49th Venice Biennale); and Tawadros' *Fault Lines*.

African ethos. It can be argued that the concept 'African art' contains essentialist connotations and that few credible art historians would attempt a 'European art of the 20th century'.²⁰² In her introduction, Kasfir notes that:

The most intractable problem when discussing contemporary art is the continent's extreme cultural diversity. While colonialism and postcolonial state-building have attempted to weave 800 or more language groups into 50-plus national identities, there is still a major problem in trying to write about the art in the 2nd half of the 20th century in so broad a region (1999: 7).

Yet these broad surveys continue to be published to this day. It would seem that Africa, more than any other continent, persists in the European imaginary as a single entity - a seamless whole with an immutable character that manifests, we are repeatedly assured, in a myriad different ways, but that remains incontrovertibly and recognisably African. The implication remains that a certain African quality is all-pervasive and immediately evident in the continent's artistic output, yet eternally elusive and impossible to define.

The above outline of 20th-century writings about modern African art production has focused on a few discursive and strategic devices that attempt to theorise the oxymoron of modern African art in such a way that the universalism of art and human progress can be avowed; while simultaneously allowing the difference of the African Other to be re-established. A key strategy in this process is to portray the contemporary African artist as a crisis-ridden metaphor of Africa's transition from the timeless collectivity of pre-history to the wide, universal now of modernity. The artist is depicted simultaneously as journeying through a no-man's land of transition between two mutually exclusive worlds and, paradoxically, as the alienated and estranged permanent occupant of both worlds. Repeated efforts are made to depict modernisation in Africa as an arduous quest that is eternally deferred by an innate, collective Africanness that defies the attainment of full individuation and modernisation. Difference and distance are established by the collectivisation of this process. Later strategies include focusing solely on untutored artists whose lively narratives delight the Western eye. This corpus of visual culture is interpreted in such a way that it affirms neo-primitivistic stereotypes of the African as shamanistic child. In this celebratory mode, the difference of the African is posited as cause for delight rather than condemnation, but the essential figure of the spontaneous, instinctive, and

²⁰² In his highly critical review of the 1991 exhibition *Africa Explores* (New York Center for African Art), John Picton (1992: 104) comments that it is indicative of the poor state of scholarship in 20th-century African art that the term 'African art' continues to be used at all. He objects to the treatment of Africa as a unified continent rather than "a very big place with a multitude of histories".

irrational African remains unchanged. From modernism to post-/late modernism, Africa and African art are theorised as a single entity - a tropic figure that emerges virtually unchanged from the dark recesses of the Western colonial imagination:

While, in the beginning, the totalising construct [of Africa] was employed to underline the peculiarity of the 'savage' mind and thus justify outsider intervention, it has been continued in being used in justifying the changing face of that mission. From redemptive Christianity to salvage anthropology, the West has found it essential to maintain this invention (Oguibe 1999: 323).

CHAPTER 4

WRITING WHITE ON BLACK: MODERN BLACK ART IN SOUTH AFRICAN ART WRITING

To the extent that the historian assumes the prerogatives of the knowing subject, discourse among historians takes precedence over discourse with the subjects of history, and the latter is constituted in accordance with the prerogatives of the former. The result is the alienation of the historical subject through the abstractions that express the historian's discourse (Dirlik 1987: 30).

Culture, thus abstracted, is alienated from the social present, and is made into a timeless attribute of peoples that determine the character of the relationships into which they enter with others. It serves as a principle for organizing time and space, with the culture of the self at the center of space and the apogee of time (Dirlik 1987:43).

South African art writing on modern black art developed, not surprisingly, very similar interpretative strategies to those outlined in the previous chapter. Yet the particularities of the South African socio-political arena, the idiosyncrasies of its historically divided academic realm, and the polemical nature of its equally divided press also bred discursive peculiarities which need to be considered. In this chapter, I attempt a deconstruction of South African writing on modern black art in order to demonstrate how these writings exemplify some of the most salient characteristics of modernist discourse. I also consider how the contingencies of historical circumstances and the ideological and political specificities of the South African context impacted on these texts. By tracing the genealogies of central rhetorical, hermeneutical and epistemological practices in these texts I hope to expose their Enlightenment roots with a view to unsettling their pre-eminence as authoritative documents.

Attempts to frame, categorise and contain the art of pioneer and later generations of black Modernists, reveal the extent to which an emerging African cultural modernity threatened the hierarchies and secure separations of the colonial and apartheid cultural text. A critical deconstruction of these writings exposes the white interpreter's experience of African cultural modernity as a dangerously grey undecidable²⁰³ that defied secure classification, and that posited enormous hermeneutical challenges. To situate this threat, it must be kept in mind that

²⁰³ I borrow this term from Bauman, who uses it to describe the neither/nor status of 'the stranger' who defies classical modernist oppositions. According to Bauman (1990: 146) undecidables produce a "horror of indetermination" as they "bring the outside to the inside, and poison the comfort and order with suspicion of chaos".

black cultural modernity accompanied the emergence of African Nationalist movements in South Africa. As Oguiibe proposes in his recent publication *Appropriation as Nationalism in Modern African Art* (2002), the emergence of African Modernism may be interpreted as an African nationalist strategy to appropriate and 'hack into' the sacred spaces of European High culture.²⁰⁴ As such, African Modernism posed a threat to the established and aspirant nationalisms of white South Africa. By transgressing the boundaries of the cultural territory reserved for Africans in the colonial binary of barbarism and civilisation, the modern black artist brought to the inner circle of European cultural modernity an uncomfortable difference and an even less digestible sameness. This experience of the modern black artist as the uncomfortably proximate 'stranger', or 'the bearer and embodiment of incongruity' – to borrow Bauman's (1990: 146) evocative description of the position of Jews in Europe – led to the development of discursive strategies and the invention of numerous taxonomies to deny proximity and coevalness, and to re-establish spatial and temporal distance. It will be postulated that apartheid-era discourse in this field adapted and redeployed a modernist/colonialist obsession with progress, civilisation and race to contain the threat and incongruity posed by an emerging African modernity and nationalism. Bourdieu (1993), in his formulation of a theory of cultural fields, suggests that positions and conventions within any particular field reflect consciousness of the field's previous history. Given the continuities (ideological and ontological) between colonial and apartheid South Africa, it stands to reason that apartheid-era discourse on African cultural production should continue and entrench the paradigms of the colonial cultural text.

The texts discussed in this chapter were written between the 1930s and the early 1990s by white academics, artists and journalists. I do intermittently refer to writings by black critics and artists (which were rather few and far between) by way of comparison, since the few black writers who wrote about their fellow artists often provide insights that throw the insularity and assumptions of white perspectives into sharp relief. All these writings deal with the concurrent artistic production of largely urbanised black artists.²⁰⁵ Although there is considerable diversity of tone in the genres of writing I include in this deconstruction – ranging from the formal, academic tone of theses to the often sensationalist journalese of newspaper reviews and reports – I have found such a remarkable degree of interpretative homogeneity that I did not

²⁰⁴ Oguiibe (2002: 245) proposes that: "The advent in parts of Africa of a new artistic idiom akin to that of Europe in the late 19th century was not intended simply to prove the equal competence of the colonized as an end, but in so doing also to undermine the ideological foundations of the colonial project and overwrite, as it were, the colonial text."

²⁰⁵ It must be kept in mind however, as I demonstrate later, that the urban-rural spheres constituted, for most black South Africans, a complicated continuum during the apartheid era.

deem it necessary to discuss each genre separately. Whether a given text emanated from the liberal humanist tradition of the English-language universities; whether it is representative of the more orthodox apartheid-speak from some of the Afrikaans and Black homeland universities; or whether it emanated from the popular sphere, these writings are largely consistent as regards the construction of race, culture and 'black identity'. Despite this remarkable homogeneity in the interpretation of modern black art, discernible shifts in rhetoric, terminologies and focus occurred through the decades; these shifts correspond, at times, to concurrent shifts in the intellectual arena of the West and at times to local and continental events and intellectual developments. I will attempt to pinpoint such correspondences where they are clearly evident.

This discussion does not purport to be a chronological survey of writings on black South African art - I found it more fruitful to isolate 'typical' themes and rhetorical conventions than to attempt a strict chronological tracing of the development of ideas and discourses from the '30s to the '90s. I do, however, maintain a chronological approach where needed to enable me to demonstrate significant changes and shifts where they occur; and also to prove the durability of certain central notions. Although I trace certain shifts in rhetoric and terminologies throughout the decades of the 20th century, the only historical turning point I deemed so major as to occasion a drastic change in the tone, interpretation and ideological orientation of discourse around black art production, was that occasioned by the Soweto student uprising of 1976. I therefore discuss the bulk of writings of the '80s and early '90s in the next chapter under the heading: 'The Resistance Paradigm', since, as I will show, these writings constitute a particular form of 'radical' modernist discourse that is significantly different to the liberal and culturalist modernisms of the previous decades. This is not to say, however, that all post '76 writings belong to this later discursive order. I therefore include post '76 texts that perpetuate the typical characteristics of earlier modernist discourse for discussion in the current chapter - and even discuss a text published in the '90s (De Jager's *Images of Man* of 1992) as an example of typical '70s discourse.

It would be reasonable of any reader to ask whether the sample of texts I selected for deconstruction is truly representative. By far the overwhelming majority of the newspaper reviews and catalogues were obtained from the Neglected Tradition holdings in the Johannesburg Gallery archives. This invaluable archive, collected by curator Steven Sack and a team of researchers as part of the celebrated retrospective exhibition on black art of the 20th century in 1988, was the result of years of painstaking archival searches and

correspondence with a wide array of artists, teachers, and institutions who donated copies of their respective databases. For subsequent years, I relied both on my own collection of clippings and catalogues, and consulted the newspaper archives of the South African National Library in Cape Town and the University of South Africa's microfiche collection. Academic sources (theses, publications and journal articles) were not difficult to obtain since not much has been produced in this field, and the few authors who have worked in this terrain tend to be quite well known and moreover tend to rely a lot on prior publications. The task of collecting articles from more popular journals was made easy by the fact that publications on black art were largely confined to specialist government-sponsored magazines dealing with 'black issues', and – much more rarely - to a handful of popular art magazines. It was only in the '80s that articles on black art production started to appear in more general, non-specialist popular magazines.

In keeping with Derrida's insistence on the importance of context in any deconstruction, I have considered contextual factors such as the institutions from which the writings emanated; target readership; and – in so far as it could be ascertained - the source and financial sponsors of publications. These factors, as well as the broad political and cultural context of urban black art production of the historical period under consideration, are briefly outlined in an introductory summary. Needless to say this particular time-span covers an immensely complex and significant period in South Africa's history – numerous revisionist 20th-century histories of South Africa emerged recently that the reader can consult for a more detailed context²⁰⁶.

4.1 CONTEXTUAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

4.1.1 A brief history of urban 'black art' in South Africa

Before proceeding with my deconstruction of specific examples of South African art writing on modern black art, I need briefly to sketch the development of a modern black art practice in South Africa. This does not purport to be a comprehensive account - I recount this complex history in the broadest possible terms to provide a chronological frame in which to situate the writings selected for deconstruction.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁶ See, for instance, Beinart (2001).

²⁰⁷ Such histories are provided by Sack (1989a) and Jephson (1989). Recently these sweeping histories have been replaced by much more in-depth historical investigations of specific schools and artists – notable in this regard are the publications of Hobbs and Rankin on Rorke's Drift (2003); and the writings of Elza Miles on Polly Street (2004) and on the first generation of urban black artists (*Land and Lives* 1997).

The emergence of a black cultural modernity coincided with a massive wave of urbanisation in the decades of the 1920s and 1930s. This is not to say, however, that the development of this cultural modernity was an exclusively urban phenomenon, as is frequently supposed. The movement of migrant labourers between urban and rural areas meant that these localities were immersed in the same complex historical dynamics. The intimate intertwining of the urban and rural life-worlds for most of South Africa's 20th-century black populations precludes any oversimplified reading of black Modernism as the by-product of urbanisation. Nor can the African urban sphere be reductively interpreted as a modern Western space that operates in binary tension with a 'traditional' African rural space. The development of African cultural modernities, as I will argue later, entails complex and ambiguous processes that defy the web of related binary oppositions (tradition/modernity, static/dynamic, African/European) implied by the rural/urban polarity. Yet it is unlikely to be coincidental that the 'pioneer' modern black artists started their careers in the 1920s and 1930s, when crippling taxes, economic depression and a devastating drought forced increasingly more black South Africans into urban wage labour. As Sack (1989a: 9) points out, the economic hardships of these decades stimulated the manufacturing of cultural items for sale (either for local communities or for white patrons). In addition, the consolidation of a black petit bourgeoisie (mainly under missionary tutelage) during these decades corresponded with, in Fanon's terms, the 'first' or 'assimilationist' stage of African nationalist awakening – which entailed a bid for equal rights and citizenship based on a demonstrable knowledge and command of the dominant culture (1967).²⁰⁸ It is significant that the 'pioneer' artists were all members of the African petit bourgeoisie and all obtained qualifications at missionary colleges²⁰⁹ – it can be argued that their art aimed at demonstrating their mastery of a Western education, and may thus be interpreted as a bid for citizenship (Van Robbroeck 2005). As Elza Miles' (1997) research on the 'pioneers' suggests, these artists worked mainly in isolation from one another, and to a large extent from their

²⁰⁸ Fanon identified three phases in the development of a nationalist culture among colonised African intellectuals (1967). The first is the assimilationist phase which entails a self-defeating appropriation of the dominant culture. When that fails, as it inevitably does, it is replaced by a cultural nationalism in which the colonised intellectual retrieves an 'authentic' African identity based on a romantic reconstruction of an idyllic pre-colonial African culture. When it becomes clear that this invocation of an idyllic tradition is contaminated at root by the colonised intellectual's own cultural alienation, and that his vision of a traditional African culture is conditioned by the coloniser's deeply encoded stereotypical representations, a revolutionary or fighting phase takes over.

²⁰⁹ This includes John Koenakeefe Mohl, Gerard Sekoto, Ernest Mancoba and George Milwa Pemba - Gerard Bhengu is the only exception. Oguibe suggests that the Christian missionary educational structures that sprang up throughout Africa in the second half of the 20th century were established to aid the production of cheap, semi-skilled labourers for the colonial administration – art would for his reason not have been a major concern at these institutions. According to Oguibe (2002: 243): "A crucial device of colonial authority was to insert and institutionalise a corridor of slippage that granted the colonized only partial access to the possibility of transition and transformation to a modern identity."

respective communities.²¹⁰ The urban proletariat (with whom these missionary educated artists had sympathies and whom they felt tasked to represent - not only artistically but also politically²¹¹) were not the consumers of their art and by and large displayed little interest therein.²¹²

During the '20s and '30s there was practically no art training available to black artists. Artists either received private tuition from well-meaning artists or patrons, or were trained in artistic skills by missionaries who provided materials, working space and commissions for religious carvings. Missionary schools played the single biggest role in the development of black art in the '30s. Schools such as the Mariannhill (founded by trappists and later run as a German Catholic mission), the Anglican Mission of Grace Dieu near Pietersburg, the Good Shepherd Mission at Hlabisa, the St. Francis Mission at Thaba 'Nchu (to name but a few), provided training, materials and encouragement to black artists²¹³. Formal art training for black artists did not exist, except at the occasional teachers training college such as the Zonnebloem College in the Cape (which offered a one year art course) and the Ndaleni Teachers Training College in Natal, which started art tuition courses in 1952. The Ndaleni Teachers Training College, in particular, played a major role in the training of teachers in modern art practice (see Leeb Du-Toit).

Although black artists could theoretically gain access to universities before enforced segregation became policy in 1959, restrictive entrance requirements and other sociological factors meant that, in practice, very few black artists received tuition at universities (Rankin 1989: 68). It was only in the 1970s, when the University of Fort Hare and the University of South Africa started Fine Arts courses, that black artists could avail themselves of formal art education.

Opportunities for art training diminished after the National Party came to power in 1948.

²¹⁰ Mohl and Tladi were friends, however, and undertook drawing expeditions together. They were on one occasion joined by Sekoto. This artistic collaboration broke up upon the outbreak of World War 2 (Miles 1997: 66).

²¹¹ Mohl, for instance, insisted that "African artists will be among the foremost interpreters of our people to the other races", and reminded a discouraged Sekoto, who was on the point of leaving the country in the 1940s for a more egalitarian cultural environment, that "South Africa or Africa needs artists badly, you see, to paint our people, our life, our way of living" (Couzens 1985: 252). Similarly Pemba saw his art as an opportunity to "tell mankind something about the natives in the south of the African continent" (Miles 1997: 74).

²¹² Pemba did, however, illustrate children's books aimed at an African market and he produced, as a young artist, block prints of African leaders which he sold to his fellow Africans in the Port Elizabeth area (Miles 1997: 68).

²¹³ See Rankin and Miles (1992) on the role of missions in black art education in South Africa.

Missionary educational structures were closed and Bantu education was implemented. The consolidation of Afrikaner nationalist power was accompanied by the intensification of systematic segregation, and the concomitant political trauma of forced removals, brutal suppression of resistance, treason trials and the imprisonment of political leaders. The demolition of freehold suburbs such as Sophiatown and District Six, and the erection of enormous, impersonal reservoirs of labour on the periphery of the big cities, destroyed the vibrant polysemic urban cultural forms – such as Marabi, Kwela and Mbaqanga – that flourished in the multi-racial melting pot of pre-apartheid cities.²¹⁴

Despite the destruction of the socio-cultural milieu, modern black art practice gained momentum in the '50s and '60s. Two community arts centres - the Polly Street Art Centre (established as a white liberal initiative in 1949) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church Arts and Crafts centre at Rorke's Drift (founded by Swedish Lutheran missionaries in 1962) - were pivotal determining forces in the development of a modern art practice among South Africa's black artists. Artists who had trained at the Polly Street centre in Johannesburg and the UCL Art and Craft centre at Rorke's Drift supplied the numerous community arts centres that sprang up in the '70s and '80's with teachers and administrators.²¹⁵ Almost without exception local literature on the topic of black art mentions the critical importance of these two centres, and a glance at the bibliographies of the artists featured in the *Neglected Tradition* exhibition catalogue reveals that the majority of practising contemporary black artists of the '60s, '70s and '80s received training at Polly Street or Rorke's Drift (1989a: 100-133). The value of these centres was mainly that they provided meeting space and studio facilities for prospective young black artists.²¹⁶ The isolation that was the lot of the 'pioneers' thus made way for a relatively cohesive community of mutually supportive artists. The artistic products of these schools, and the numerous artists whose styles and iconography were influenced by the first generation artists who trained there, were broadly classified as 'Township Art' or 'African Expressionism' - I will discuss these appellations later.

²¹⁴ Marabi, Kwela and Mbaqanga refer to musical styles, influenced by American Jazz, which flourished in the freehold suburbs in the first half of the 20th century.

²¹⁵ See Van Robbroeck (1991; 2004) for reasons for the proliferation of community arts centres in the '70s and '80s, and for a discussion of the role of community arts in apartheid South Africa.

²¹⁶ Skotnes, for many years Cultural Recreation Officer at Polly Street, maintains that the seminal importance of the centre resided in the fact that "it was the home of Black urban art in the Johannesburg Townships. Before Polly Street there was little of any significance ... After Polly Street there was at least a group of professionals who [formed] the foundation of urban Black art in this country" (in Lisoos 1986:53). Skotnes did not take into consideration the remarkable artistic achievements of 'pioneer' artists of the first half of the 20th century such as Pemba, Sekoto, Mohl and Mancoba. These artists' work was largely ignored in South African art historical publications until the late '80s and early '90s, when their remarkable contributions were unearthed as part of a revisionist attempt to retrieve the neglected history of 'black' South African art.

From the '70s onwards the market for modern black art flourished as more private galleries promoted black artists.²¹⁷ Since black artistic output emanated largely from the two centres of Polly Street and Rorke's Drift, artists mainly gained exposure through group exhibitions. Multi-racial exhibitions were a rare exception. It is ironic – and illustrative of the ability of discourse to create material realities – that the tendency to perceive modern black art as a group phenomenon generated art practices (such as group exhibitions and racially exclusive arts centres) that were eventually instrumental in the production of a distinct and canonical 'black art'. Urban black artistic output assumed an increasingly collective nature as successive generations of black artists were isolated from the white arts scene and encouraged to emulate successful older black artists. The imperative to produce commercially viable and hence recognisably 'African' art furthermore resulted in a reiterative style and subject matter that rapidly saturated the market.

Modern black art also continued to be an almost exclusively male phenomenon. Reasons for the masculinity of modern black art can only be speculated upon. If, as I contend, modern black art was initially intended as a marker of civility and thus constituted a bid for modern citizenship, it could be that women artists, who were the main producers of 'traditional' material culture, were coerced to play the role of custodians of tradition, thus ensuring that modern subjectivity remained a male preserve.²¹⁸ McClintock's *Imperial Leather* (1995) endorses this reading of the gendered nature of nationalism in general and African nationalism in particular. According to McClintock, the male role in the formation of nationhood is metonymic, while the female role is largely symbolic. The agency of men in their bid for national recognition relies upon the role of women as passive symbolic bearers of the traditional character of the nation.

The Soweto student uprising of 1976 and the subsequent decades of political foment occasioned a major shift in South African art praxis and in art discourse in general. Cultural polarisation gained momentum when P.W. Botha, upon coming to power in 1977, announced

²¹⁷ Such private galleries include the Carriagehouse Gallery, Johannesburg; Elizabeth Art Gallery, Johannesburg; Hoffer Art Gallery, Pretoria; Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg; Gallery 21, Johannesburg; Gallery 101, Johannesburg; Die Kunsamer, Cape Town; Gallery International, Cape Town; Johannes Stegmann Art Gallery, Bloemfontein; Karen McKerron Gallery, Johannesburg; Natalie Knight Gallery, Johannesburg; Market Art Gallery, Johannesburg; Adler Fielding Galleries, Johannesburg; Cassirer Fine Art, Johannesburg; Totem-Menenghelli Gallery, Johannesburg; Orde Levinson's Fine Art, Johannesburg; Lidchi Art Gallery, Johannesburg; and the SA Association of Art Galleries, Cape Town, Pretoria and Johannesburg.

²¹⁸ This has been borne out in research I did on the gendered teaching at community arts centres (Van Robbroeck 1990c).

the 'Total Strategy' package to counter the 'Total Onslaught' allegedly launched by the ANC and other 'communist inspired' agencies. In the Defence White Paper which announced the launch of the 'Total Strategy', Botha called for a co-ordinated programme which included a cultural offensive to counteract the 'Total Onslaught' (Duncan 1989:23). The cultural arena became increasingly politically fraught as a radical polarisation between 'apartheid culture' and 'resistance culture' compelled artists – black and white – to commit themselves to a revolutionary art praxis. The politicisation of the arts continued apace as a number of influential conferences were held, notably the 1979 *State of Art in South Africa Conference* in Cape Town, the 1982 *Culture and Resistance Symposium* in Gaborone, and the 1987 ANC organised *Culture in Another South Africa Conference* in Amsterdam. A younger, much more militant and politicised generation of black artists resisted what they perceived as the 'self-pity art' of the 'Township' generation (see Chapter 5 for more details).

Another event that occasioned significant change in the reception (and thus rebounding on the production) of black art, was the *Tributaries* exhibition of 1985, curated by Ricky Burnett and sponsored by BMW. This exhibition showcased, for the first time, the cultural modernity of rural artists such as Jackson Hlungwane, Noria Mabasa, and Nelson Mukhuba. Their art was rapidly labelled 'transitional art'. It was initially well received in an urban art market that was already bored with the Township art phenomenon, and can be regarded as a local manifestation of the international taste for untutored informal art from Africa during the same decades. As some of these celebrated rural artists started production lines that provided employment for family and community members, the market for these products also waned as it became saturated.²¹⁹

As apartheid was defeated in the 1990s (and the cultural boycott lifted), South African artists increasingly took note of trends in the international art arena, and more nuanced and complex modalities replaced the resistance paradigm. Race increasingly lost significance as an overt criterion for classification in art (but continues, as I will argue, to inform post-apartheid cultural politics in covert ways). Instead, post-apartheid artists have undertaken a systematic deconstruction of race (increasingly also questioning the normativity of whiteness), along with other determinants of identity such as gender, sexual orientation and nationality. The reincorporation of South Africa in the international art arena resulted in a tendency among a

²¹⁹ The tale of the 'discovery' of the 'transitional' artists – and the effects this 'discovery' had on the lives and families of the individual artists as well as on rural art production in general - is admirably dealt with in Duncan's MA Dissertation which explores the historical intervention of the *Tributaries* exhibition in the art of selected artists from Venda and Gazankulu (1994).

young generation of professional artists to address less distinctly local concerns. When local concerns are raised it is often done in the spirit of self-reflexivity.²²⁰ This shift towards an internationally competitive idiom has not, however, occurred without a certain cost. As I will argue in my conclusion, it is ironic that the self-tutored visual culture of the cities and the rural areas is suffering a new kind of neglect in 'the new' democratic South Africa.

4.1.2 Race discourses in South Africa

A detailed summary of the history of South African race thinking is beyond the scope of this thesis, yet I need to consider some of the most prominent theoretical shifts and debates since they - directly or indirectly - impacted on the reception of indigenous South African cultures. Modern black art was not dealt with in any of the art history departments before the late 1970's, with the result that research on black South African art was conducted largely by anthropologists and government departments such as the Department of Information and the Department of Native Affairs. It is therefore necessary to briefly outline the main characteristics, discursive shifts and ideological schisms in South African anthropology, since anthropologists contributed (throughout the 20th century) significantly towards writings on black artists.

The history of South African race writing is complex and fraught with contradictions, as is abundantly demonstrated in Dubow's excellent genealogy of scientific racism in South Africa, *Illicit Union* (1995); and in Tooke's history of South African anthropology *Imperfect Interpreters* (1979). South Africa, as Dubow convincingly argues, played an important international role in both the provision of raw race material and as a laboratory for the manufacturing of race theories.²²¹ Dubow (1995: 10) suggests that there was always considerable interaction between overseas and local academics in the construction of race discourses, and that South African race theories and racist policies were not only formulated with reference to European, and increasingly in the 20th century, American intellectual trends, but also significantly impacted on the metropolitan manufacturing of race discourses.²²² Dubow (1995) argues that South Africa provided fodder for the most prominent race theories from the 17th century

²²⁰ Such as, for instance, the critique of traditionalist practices such as male initiation ceremonies (see Ledimo 2004).

²²¹ Dubow quotes Smuts (1929) – in distinctly positivist mode - describing South Africa as a 'human laboratory' which provided a unique "experimental station and laboratory in racial and cultural relations" (1995: 14).

²²² Dubow thus questions the common belief that the interaction between the colonies and the central metropole was such that the colonies provided raw empirical data that was processed and transformed into theories in the metropole (from where the theories were then exported back to and put into practice in the colonies).

onwards,²²³ and that South African race discourses developed a distinctive style and language in response to its very particular material and social conditions.²²⁴

Dubow points out that ethnological and anthropological knowledge was only systematised and institutionalised in South Africa after the South African War (1899-1901) since this era saw the achievement of colonial self-government, which provoked questions about nationhood and franchise. The 'native question' increasingly came to be regarded as the 'native problem' in need of a comprehensive 'solution' as independent South Africa came to define itself as a modern nation state (1995: 12).²²⁵

After World War 1 the South African university system was expanded, and often recruited lecturers and researchers from overseas. This tendency, Dubow argues, contributed simultaneously a greater independence from and integration into the Imperial intellectual network (1995: 14). The decades leading up to the World War 2 were characterised by a logical positivist faith in the advance of science and reason – which in turn led to a strongly technocratic approach to government. Dubow argues that racial segregation came to dominate the political agenda from the 1920s on as the need to find solutions to the 'native problem' gained momentum – in this regard, the biological anthropology then in vogue in South African universities provided the Union government with theoretical ammunition to implement systematic segregation. The rise of social and cultural anthropology in South African universities in the mid '20s, however, gradually displaced the centrality of physical anthropology in race debates, and provided a sustained critique of the methods and assumptions of biological racism. These more liberal humanist anthropological theories gained momentum after World War 2, as part of an international interrogation of scientific racism and the Western assumption of white racial superiority. In South Africa, however, this shift towards a more liberal anthropology was

²²³ South Africa's indigenous peoples – particularly the 'Hottentots' and 'Bosjesmen' - occupied a central position in Enlightenment anthropology. Knox's *The Races of Men* (1850) was one of the most influential theories of the 19th century. Knox spent three years in South Africa. Galton, the pioneer of eugenics and Fischer, one of the main formulators of Nazi eugenic theory, also visited South Africa. It must however be kept in mind that several anti-racist theories (such as those of Hogben in the 1930s) also had their origins here (Dubow 1995). It was, however, particularly the very prominent role played by South African palaeo-anthropologists such as Dart and Tobias that contributed towards theories around human diversification and origins (Dubow 1995: 13).

²²⁴ Dubow employs as example the 'poor white' problem in South Africa that necessitated the development of theories that prioritised environmental factors rather than hereditary factors to explain social and economic inferiority (1995: 16).

²²⁵ By the same token art history, as a discipline expressly concerned with the definition and containment of national identities, concerned itself with black art production not as part of South Africa's national art, but as an alien body positing taxonomic and hermeneutic problems to the definitive characterisation of a national South African art – as will be shown later.

accompanied by the rise of Afrikaner nationalism, which contributed race discourses radically at odds with this progressive trend.

While no simple ideological lines can be drawn between English and Afrikaans universities, with conservative and progressive academics emanating from both, it is undoubtably true that Afrikaans universities played a significant role in both the formulation and theoretical justification of certain key Apartheid practices. By the same token, although the English universities delivered their share of Apartheid apologists, they tended to serve as sites of ideological resistance to Apartheid policies, particularly after the 1976 Student Uprisings. The polarisation between Afrikaans and English universities started already in the 1930s,²²⁶ but worsened as the Afrikaner nationalists increasingly came to rely on anthropological theory to formulate and justify a policy of separate development.²²⁷ The *volkekunde* practised at the Afrikaans universities was closely linked with the 'native policies' and administration of the apartheid state after 1948. According to Hammond-Tooke (1997: 132-138) Afrikaner affirmative action retained most state anthropological posts for anthropologists trained at Afrikaans universities, and the country-wide structures of the Department of Native Affairs were supplied of experts on indigenous cultures by academics exclusively trained at these universities²²⁸. The *Volkekunde* practised at the Afrikaans universities was informed by northern European anthropological theories – particularly German - while the English universities by and large conformed to the tenets of British structural-functionalism. The anthropology promoted by the Afrikaans universities supported an understanding of cultures as self-sustaining wholes and relied on the tradition of the ethnographic monograph that treated 'tribal' groups as static traditional entities.²²⁹ The trend was to borrow from functional anthropology a tendency to view 'tribes' as cultural isolates, but to ignore the sociological function of culture. The strong focus on 'culture' rather than 'society' inevitably resulted in a conservative concern with tradition as the legitimate carrier of the authentic cultural 'spirit' of each ethnic group. This in

²²⁶ Dubow discusses the discovery of Mapungubwe in 1937 as an example of this polarisation. The relationship between culture and race was theorised differently by academics from Wits and UCT than academics from Pretoria University (1995: 103). The race-typological approach adopted by members of Pretoria University's anthropology department conflicted with the English academic's distrust of a simple conflation of race and culture.

²²⁷ The German anthropologist Eiselen from Stellenbosch University was one of the main architects of apartheid and proposed the promotion of 'self-determination' as a solution to 'the native problem'.

²²⁸ There were, however, exceptions to this rule, such as the anthropologist Sieghardt Bourquin who was not trained in '*Volkekunde*'.

²²⁹ The University of Stellenbosch graduate Van Warmelo, for instance, played a major role in the shaping of native affairs policies and served for years in the Department of Native Affairs. As a Government ethnologist he undertook detailed surveys on all South African tribes – no less than 44 ethnological studies were published by the department under his guidance (Hammond-Tooke 1997: 128).

turn served the ends of Afrikaner nationalist protectionism towards Afrikaner culture and values; and aided a policy of separate development and 'self-determination' for all cultures.

While also promoting a relativistic cultural monadism, anthropologists from the English universities were more concerned with the social dimensions of ethnic groups, and by and large eschewed the Romantic and conservative ethos of culturalism in favour of a consideration of the social functions of culture. Neither the English nor the Afrikaans universities, however, adequately accounted for change and intercultural contact. It was only as rapid urbanisation became a serious social and political issue in the '60s, according to Hammond-Tooke, that South African anthropologists started treating change and the rural-urban continuum as an important dimension of anthropology (1997: 150).²³⁰ Significantly the first serious and sustained academic attempts to discuss modern black artistic developments occurred during this same period.²³¹

Another major discursive shift occurred in the late '70s and '80s, when English Marxist anthropology superseded liberal functionalism at English universities,²³² with the result that liberalism became the *bête noire* of both the Afrikaans state and the radical left at the English universities. The Marxist anthropology of the struggle years displaced the focus from race to class. The emphasis on class conflict shifted academic interest from the cultural monad to intercultural contact; and from rural 'traditional' culture to the urban labour sphere. While this shift in focus addressed, and to an extent, redressed, the omissions of cultural relativism, it tended to elide the problematics of race as prevalent socio-political discourse in South Africa; and according to Hammond-Tooke (1997: 5-6), neglected fieldwork and empirical research in favour of broad, reductively materialistic theories.

²³⁰ This corresponds with international developments in anthropological writing – Herskovits' and Bascom's *Continuity and Change in African Cultures* appeared in 1962.

²³¹ When the first research about modern black artistic output emerged from universities in the 1970s, similar fault lines could be discerned as manifested in anthropology. Afrikaans university publications about modern black art tended to adopt a strong culturalist and essentialist approach; while publications emanating from English universities tended to be more contextualist. Rankin recounts how tensions between Afrikaans and English universities prevented a common association (the South African Association of Art Historians) from being forged at the Rand Afrikaans University in 1984. Rankin remembers how the Afrikaans art historians (who first mooted the idea), protested that the young association had been 'hi-jacked' by English art historians, and formed a separate Afrikaans association called *Die Kunshistoriese Werkgemeenskap* (1998: 90).

²³² Hammond-Tooke laments this development and blames it for the demise of South African anthropological influence in the international arena (1997: 5). It must be kept in mind, however, that Hammond-Tooke, an anthropologist at Wits University, was himself a structural-functionalist whose own approach was characteristic of the liberalism that was displaced by Marxist radicalism in the '70s and '80s.

In addition, the imposition of the academic boycott isolated South African intellectuals from developments in the international academic realm. The result was that South Africa became over-conscious of local polemics, largely disregarded the thorny terrain of race in favour of class, and neglected theoretical developments in the international arena. These reductive discursive characteristics of the struggle years will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 5.

4.1.3 A brief historical survey of the critical, institutional and art historical reception of modern black art

In order to provide a contextual frame for my deconstruction of selected texts, it is necessary to consider the institutional, critical and academic reception of modern black artistic practice in South Africa during the 20th century. Since I do not maintain historical chronology or genre distinctions in my deconstruction, this broad frame serves temporally and spatially to locate the texts concerned. However, because the textual reception of black art was acutely influenced by museum and display practices (and vice versa),²³³ I also briefly need to consider collection and display policies during this period.²³⁴

While anthropology, by definition, concerns itself with race, ethnicity and 'other' cultures, art history developed historically to determine a canon of 'the best' European art; it served to trace not only a progressive development of major European artists and styles, but also to establish art as signifier of European (and, after World War 2, American) national characteristics.²³⁵ The result is that in South Africa, art history was taught as a chronology of Western art styles for most of the 20th century. In addition South African art history (following trends in England, Europe and America) remained caught in a formalist paradigm²³⁶ for most of the 20th century, which effectively isolated it from interdisciplinary debates about race and culture. While developments in anthropological discourses on race were therefore not exactly duplicated in art writing, similar and broadly corresponding discursive shifts and ideological contests can be discerned in the field of art historical discourse.

²³³ Rankin (1993: 31) demonstrates how the first prominent article to appear on Sekoto (by Battiss in *Ons Kuns* 1961), led to the purchase, soon after, of his works by three museums from different parts of the country. Similarly, when Lindop published a monograph on Sekoto in 1988, institutional interest in the artist increased and massively influenced the market price of his works. By the same token, the practice of galleries to organise group exhibitions of black artists' work, contributed towards the discursive tendency to regard it as a collective phenomenon.

²³⁴ I can do this only perfunctorily – for a thorough account, see Rankin (1993).

²³⁵ The capital of the art world shifted from Paris to New York along with a significant proportion of Europe's avant garde during the Nazi occupation of France.

²³⁶ Formalism was an art historical methodology that focused exclusively on the analysis of the pure formal elements and characteristics of a given artwork. This quintessentially High Modernist art historical method developed in response to the Modernist avant garde pursuit of pure form in the early 20th century.

Since art history retained its Eurocentric character in the early 20th century, South African art and cultural heritage was neglected at South African universities and museums. Books about South African art (as a national phenomenon) appeared for the first time in the 1930s, and tended to exclude black artists altogether, or included one or two at best. Until the 1960s these texts were in Afrikaans and were at least partly motivated by the Afrikaner nationalist struggle for cultural recognition, and hence focused predominantly on Afrikaner artists (Rankin 1993: 6).²³⁷ The exclusion of black artists from South Africa's emerging canon of national art indicates the extent to which the national body imagined by the term 'South Africa' was a white one – and increasingly, from the '20s onwards, a white Afrikaner entity. As Preziosi points out, the discipline of art history played an indispensable role - globally - in the establishment of national identities:

What came to be the canonical art of art history was indeed a magical and paradoxical object, perfectly suited to being an explanatory instrument in the enterprise of fabricating and sustaining the modern nation-state and its (statuesque) epitome, the citizen (1998: 516).

This exclusive conception of a national South African identity accurately mirrored the concurrent political disenfranchisement of South Africa's black populations. As the possessive title of one of these national art publications: *'Ons Kuns/Our Art'* suggests, the black populations were simply not deemed part of the national body. Alexander's *Art in South Africa Since 1900* (1962: 41), for instance, has a subcategory titled 'The African and the Bushman' where mention is made of indigenous art traditions merely in so far as they influenced white artists.²³⁸ The first attempt to assimilate modern black artists in the canon of a national South African art, was Berman's general reference book, *Art and Artists of South Africa* (first published in 1971, republished and enlarged in 1983), which included discussion of the Polly Street and ELC art and crafts centres, and incorporated a few entries on individual black artists. Berman's text, as the most comprehensive attempt to encompass the variety of

²³⁷ Examples of such publications are Bouman (1935), Nienaber (1951), and *Ons Kuns/Our Art* (1959 & 1961). Bouman and Nienaber include no black artists, and *Ons Kuns* included in its first edition (1968) only Sekoto. Later editions also included Kumalo. An English 'National survey', compiled by Jeppe (1963) includes brief discussions of four black artists. Hattingh's book *Kunswaardering* (1964), which was prescribed in schools throughout the apartheid years, provides a linear history of Western artistic development which starts with Palaeolithic art. It has a final chapter on South Africa under the heading 'Eie Suid-Afrikaanse Kuns' which includes only white Afrikaans artists and one English artist, Irma Stern.

²³⁸ Alexander was then art critic of the Afrikaans newspaper *Die Burger*. His book appeared in Afrikaans and English.

South African art, exerted considerable influence on later writings about modern black art, as will be discussed later.

The racial exclusiveness of early 20th-century South African writings suggests that the category of 'art' was still regarded, in early 20th-century South Africa, as a European prerogative. It clearly never occurred to most art writers that the 'traditional' material culture of South Africa's black populations could be classified as 'art'. Nettleton (1989: 28) mentions the case of Bosardi (1954) who, in his book on the colonial artist Anreith, referred to him as 'Africa's first sculptor'. This perception was probably exacerbated by the common misconception that Southern Africa, unlike East, West and Central Africa, had no artistic traditions of note. Southern African traditional material culture, which featured relatively little in the line of free-standing sculpture but incorporated a wealth of finely wrought functional objects, was relegated to the inferior category of craft and unfavourably compared with the cultural products of Central and West Africa. It was therefore commonplace to regard the Southern African 'tribes' as proficient in music and the oral arts, but as deficient in material culture.²³⁹ Unlike the artistic traditions of Central and West Africa, South Africa's indigenous artistic heritage therefore elicited limited interest. It was not until the late '70s, when the University of the Witwatersrand introduced courses on African art, that a concerted effort was made to research 'traditional' South African art.²⁴⁰ The perceived inferiority of South African traditionalist art also impacted on the interpretation of modern black art, as will be discussed later.

The Eurocentric and ethnocentric nature of South African art writing was also echoed by museum collections and exhibition practices. Until the late 1940s, international exhibitions showcasing South African art included no black artists.²⁴¹ A similar omission characterised local national art exhibitions.²⁴² In the 1930s selected works by black artists were incorporated

²³⁹ Kidd (in Nettleton 1989: 25) stated, for instance, that: "The art faculty [of the Zulu] is most deficient among the natives ... some kafirs have a rudimentary aptitude for making decorative patterns, but as a rule this faculty develops late in life, or after the kafir has been subject to European influence". See also Bryant (in Nettleton 1989: 25): "The Zulus ... had a perfect eye for symmetry, but being naturally deficient in artistic (or indeed any other) imagination or inventive power, their work always lacked decorative embellishment, and so was by no means comparable to the multifarious artistic products of the East African and Central African Bantu craftsmen."

²⁴⁰ See, for instance, research on Zulu art (Klopper 1992) and Venda art (Nettleton 1984). The research that emanated from this institution was supported by the Standard Bank collection (housed at Wits) of traditional Southern African art which expanded to include various cultural modernities and today arguably constitutes the most comprehensive collection of informal (ie non-academic) Southern African art in the world.

²⁴¹ Such as the South African displays at the *British Empire Exhibition* of 1924. The 1936 exhibition included John Koenakeefe Mohl.

²⁴² Sekoto was the only black artist to participate in the South African Association of Art's 1948 touring exhibition of South African art; the *Van Riebeeck Festival Exhibition* of 1952; and the *Rhodes Centenary Exhibition* in 1953.

under exclusive categories such as 'Special Exhibit of Native Sculpture' at the South African Academy exhibitions.²⁴³ Participation increased as more black artists emerged from Polly Street and Rorke's Drift,²⁴⁴ but these exhibitions often implemented segregational categories - the *Artists of Fame and Promise* exhibitions in the '60s and '70s, for instance, gave effect to the policy of apartheid by including a separate category for 'non-white artists'.²⁴⁵ A statement by Long in the introduction to the 1948-9 catalogue of the South African Association of Arts concerning a Sekoto painting, reveals the extent to which modern black art presented a hermeneutical and taxonomic problem to the white art establishment: "The position of Gerard Sekoto, a Bantu artist, is difficult to assess as he is divorced by race and environment from the European artists of the country - the most important problem in the sub-continent today" (in Carman 1988).

South African art - and black art in particular - was generally neglected at local museums in the first half of the 20th century.²⁴⁶ Rankin points out that private, commercial galleries spearheaded the display of black artists' work and that galleries such as the Gainsborough gallery in Johannesburg created a popular market among private buyers, so that the reputation of artists such as Sekoto was already established by the time institutional and museum collections started purchasing their works (1993: 8). In the '70s and '80s, private gallery support increased substantially.²⁴⁷ This, however, invited criticism of excessive commercialism. Rankin points out that while the neglect of black artists in national collections indicated a level of official dismissal, "its successful exposure on the commercial market afforded it the disparaging label of popular art" (1993: 10).

²⁴³ Inclusion of black artists clearly created classification problems for the organisers of these exhibitions, since their works were included rather erratically under specially created categories or, more rarely, under existing general descriptions. For a more comprehensive account of this, see Miles (1997: 55).

²⁴⁴ *The Republic Festival Exhibition* of 1966 included eight black artists among the 210 artists in total. The three quadrennial exhibitions of South African art (1956, 1960 and 1964) included no black artists, however.

²⁴⁵ According to Thorpe the first non-racial art exhibition in South Africa (*Art South Africa Today*) was held in 1963 under the auspices of the South African Institute of Race Relations: "... up to this point in South Africa's art history, exhibitions and competitions had been held for 'Bantu, Indian and Coloured' artists" (1988: 2).

²⁴⁶ The Johannesburg Art Gallery was the first to acquire work by a black artist (Sekoto) in 1940. However, no further purchases of black art were made by that institution until 1972. The South African National Gallery, Tatham Gallery, and Pretoria Art Gallery purchased their first works by black artists in 1964 (Rankin 1993). By 1987, the Johannesburg Art Gallery included only 19 works by black artists in its permanent collection (*Record of the Johannesburg Art Gallery Permanent Collection* 1987). Rankin points out that acquisition policies were nonexistent in South African museums and that works were largely collected on the whim of the directors - hence Albert Werth of the Pretoria Gallery, who completed a doctorate on primitivism, established a substantial African art collection from the gallery's inception (Rankin 1993: 11).

²⁴⁷ These galleries included Gallery 21 and Gallery 101 (both belonging to the Haenggi family who were renowned for their support of black artists), the Adler Fielding, Lidchi, and Egon Guenther Galleries and, in the '70s and '80s, particularly the Linda Goodman Gallery (Rankin 1993: 9-10).

The major museums focused on the collection of British and French artists, and when there was a lone protest against this state of affairs in the press in 1946, it was a lament about the neglect of Afrikaner art in the Johannesburg Gallery collection. Rankin points out that:

The silence created by the near absence of African artists in public collections in South Africa was critical, in view of the seminal role museum collections play in shaping a concept of what constitutes the standard corpus of art. Black South African artists, marginalised by the social order and excluded from art schools and universities, were given no sense of the status of their work by public collections either (1993: 4).

The first reviews to emerge about contemporary black art in the newspapers were about the self-taught sculptor Hezekiel Ntuli and the painter Moses Tladi in the early 1930s.²⁴⁸ These reviews, as will emerge in the course of this deconstruction, are predictably paternalistic and/or inclined to express surprise at the cultural achievements of 'a native'. Some of the earliest articles (from the 1930s) on modern black art were published in the black newspapers *Ilanga Lase*, *Umteteli wa Bantu* and *Bantu World*. The writer and African nationalist Dhlomo published quite extensively on contemporary black artists' work, and in particular on Mohl,²⁴⁹ whom he regarded as part of the generation of 'new Africans' with which Dhlomo identified himself. In 1943 an anonymous article about Mohl (J.K. Mohl, Outstanding Landscape Painter) was published in *Bantu World*, and the artist was compared with the prominent black writer, African nationalist and political figure, Sol Plaatje. It is significant that some of the earliest coverage of the emerging phenomenon of modern black art should have emanated from the black press. It not only suggests the extent to which the emergence of a modern black art articulated the nationalist aspirations of the black petit bourgeoisie (to which most of the 'pioneer' Modernists belonged), but also indicates the marginalisation of this nationalist quest to the semi-independent black press.²⁵⁰ The exclusion of black artists from the emerging national art canon of the newly independent South African state constitutes an act of omission that echoes the wider suppression of African nationalist aspirations. The indication that the black intelligentsia of the 1940s interpreted the emergence of a black modern artistic idiom in nationalistic terms, lends some credence to Oguibe's (2002) contention that an emerging

²⁴⁸ An Artist in Clay: Native Commission Surprised: Model of Lion for SA Museum (1930); and Native Genius: Amazing Sculptor in City: Zulu Love: Models of Wildlife: Praise from Princess Alice (1930). See also Native Art (1930).

²⁴⁹ Mohl, who worked in a style that can be described as academic naturalism, was the first black artist to have work accepted for the annual exhibition of the South African Academy in Johannesburg in 1942, and again in 1943.

²⁵⁰ See Tomaselli and Louw (1991) for information about the independent black press in South Africa.

cultural modernity in Africa can be read as an attempt to 'hack into' the sacred spaces of European high culture.²⁵¹ It is therefore of particular interest that the earliest white writings about the 'pioneer' modern black painters tended to dismiss their works as childlike and only partially successful attempts at mimicry, whereas Dhlomo and other black authors interpreted their art as acts of indisputable mastery.

From the '50s onwards, newspaper coverage of modern black art increased substantially as more black Modernists emerged from the newly established art centres of Polly Street (1949) and the ELC Art and Craft centre at Rorke's Drift (1963). The growing and ever more visible presence of modern urban black artists could not be ignored. While coverage of the earliest practitioners of a black cultural modernity tended to treat this phenomenon as a curiosity and an anomaly, the second – considerably bigger – wave of modern black artists supplied by these art centres forced acknowledgement, if not recognition, of their work. Recognition was supplied, inter alia, by a generation of white Modernist artists who were rebelling against the conservatism and Eurocentrism of the South African art scene by pursuing an indigenous primitivism which purported to declare the African origins of South African art. Skotnes (the director of the art programme at Polly Street Art Centre in Johannesburg) and Battiss were two of the most prominent exponents of a local Modernism with a strong African 'spirit of place'. The Amadlozi group (established in 1957 by the German immigrant Gunther sought to awaken the 'Africanness' of South African art, and invited the black sculptor Sydney Kumalo to join their ranks.

Apart from liberal white support, modern black art was also incongruously given coverage and exposure by the apartheid state. A substantial body of writing on 20th-century black art emanated from publications launched by the South African Information Service (such as *Bantu*, *Informa* and *SA Panorama*), which also arranged and sponsored travelling exhibitions of modern black art to Australia, America and Europe. The South African Information Service was intent on promoting a view of a flourishing cultural *eiesoortigheid*²⁵² under a system of separate development. Although state patronage of black art served a number of complex ideological purposes, including the fulfilment of the state's perceived pastoral role, state patronage of modern black art at the height of the apartheid era also served to counteract growing anti-apartheid sentiment abroad. Modern black art, inter alia, had propaganda

²⁵¹ In my article *The Failure of Assimilation: Moderate African Nationalism in South African Visual Culture of the Early 20th Century* (Van Robbroeck 2005), I propose that assimilation as nationalist strategy perhaps involves a more complex and richly ambivalent blend of compliance and resistance than Oguibe suggests.

²⁵² The word can be loosely translated as 'true to its own character or kind'.

value to the apartheid state because it served as evidence of a flourishing black culture, and signified the 'gifts' of progress and modernity implicitly offered by the white economy and administration.²⁵³

Intermittent coverage was also provided by the widely disseminated and popular periodical *Lantern* (1949 to 1995), published by the South African Association for the Advancement of Knowledge and Culture. This bilingual magazine targeted an educated, middle class white audience and provided general information on topics as diverse as science and art. From 1951, the Anglo American Corporation of South Africa included writings on black art production in their magazine, *Optima*; and in the '60s and '70s the art periodical *Artlook* and the South African Association of Arts' *Art Calender/Kunskalender* published the occasional article on black artists. It must be noted, however, that there were not significant differences between the approach of government and private journals, since the same authors tended to publish in both – thus De Jager, for instance, published in *South African Panorama*, *Bantu*, *Artlook* and *Lantern* (as well as the American journal *African Arts*). The scarcity of researchers in the field meant that the same authors' names often appear in widely divergent contexts – academic, popular and government sponsored. All these periodicals were mainly targeted at a white audience. Apart from a few articles in black newspapers such as *Ilanga Lase* and *Bantu World* the only consistent pre-1976 coverage not aimed particularly at white, middleclass art patrons, was the literary and art journal *The Classic*. Established by Ezekiel Mphahlele, Lewis Nkosi and Can Themba in the early 1960s, *The Classic* expressed the growing influence of the Black Consciousness movement in South Africa – an influence that is clearly discernable in the tone and interpretive strategies employed in this journal's coverage of black artists' work – as will be demonstrated later.

The most prolific and intensive researcher in the field (and still the best known and most frequently quoted today) - Professor EJ de Jager of the University of Fort Hare – started publishing in the '70s. His *Contemporary African Art in South Africa* (1973) remained the only monograph on the topic until the *Neglected Tradition* catalogue was published in 1989. De

²⁵³ It is significant that a number of black art exhibitions were held abroad in 1976, perhaps to counteract the negative publicity of the Soweto upheavals. That year, the Cultural Section of the Department of Information organised and sponsored an exhibition of Zulu art in Tervuren, a modern black art exhibition in New York, and an exhibition of ten modern black artists in Australia. In 1978, the department of information also organised an exhibition of black art in West Germany (Basson 1978). In 1982, the Department of National Education organised an exhibition of 'the various populations groups' in Bonn, and a travelling print exhibition in Madrid and Portugal.

Jager was an anthropologist by training and head of African studies at the University of Fort Hare in the Eastern Cape, which was - until the establishment of the homeland universities in the '70s - the only university for black students in South Africa.²⁵⁴ De Jager published numerous articles and two books on a variety of modern black artists and established South Africa's biggest collection of modern black art at the University of Fort Hare.²⁵⁵ His last monograph on the topic, *Images of Man*, emerged in 1994.

De Jager's writings reflect his training, at an Afrikaans university, in *volkekunde*, and may be deemed representative of a conservative anthropological outlook that endorses the notion of cultural essences and *eiesoortigheid*. De Jager's writings undoubtedly exercised the most pervasive influence on subsequent publications on the topic: I therefore devote a substantial portion of my deconstruction to his body of work.

The first university theses on the topic of modern black art came from the University of Cape Town. Krell's master's thesis, *Urban African Art in South Africa* (1972), which dealt primarily with the early black Modernists, constitutes a formalist analysis (with all the limitations this entails) of these artists' output.²⁵⁶ More definitive and influential texts emerged from the Afrikaans universities. Snyman produced a master's dissertation on the topic of style and meaning in contemporary 'Bantu' art (*Styl en Betekenis in die Skilderkuns met Verwysing na Kontemporêre Bantoekuns in Suid-Afrika*) at Potchefstroom University in 1978; and in 1980, Professor of Art History at Pretoria University, Scholz, edited and wrote *Phafa-Nyika: Contemporary Black Art in South Africa with special reference to the Transvaal* in collaboration with some of her students. Both these texts will be referred to in some depth since they encode some of the most fundamental and pervasive contemporary presuppositions about race and culture. These writings are demonstrably influenced by the *volkekundige* culturalism prevalent

²⁵⁴ The University of Fort Hare was founded in 1916 as a missionary teaching college, and was for half a century the only university open to black students in southern and eastern Africa (apart from a very small number of black South Africans that attended the universities of Cape Town and the Witwatersrand before the National Party government disallowed such access).

²⁵⁵ It was, as Rankin points out, in accordance with official policy that this collection should have been kept at Fort Hare, which was, at that stage, the only 'Bantu' University in the country. De Jager told Rankin that the contemporary collection was motivated by a desire of the museum committee to extend the ethnology collection by including evidence of 'acculturation' (1993: 13).

²⁵⁶ Krell's thesis seems to have vanished from the library of the University of Cape Town - I rely therefore on Snyman for this critique of Krell's approach. Snyman accuses Krell of disregarding the socio-political content of Sekoto's work in favour of a purely formalistic analysis. A quote by Krell describes Sekoto's work as "formal composition devoid of a 'real' world" (1978:86). Considering the acute social focus of Sekoto's work, Snyman's criticism of Krell's formalism is certainly justified.

at Afrikaans universities throughout the apartheid years and rely substantially on De Jager's prior publications.

At the University of Cape Town, Jephson's thesis, *Aspects of Twentieth Century Black South African Art up to 1980* (1989), by and large uncritically reiterated the interpretations of prior publications, but supplied more contextual and socio-political information and eschewed some of the more essentialist pronouncements of prior research.²⁵⁷ In that sense, her thesis meets the expectation that academics trained at English universities in the late '70s and '80s would be less inclined to perpetrate pure culturalism and would be more concerned with the social and contextual dimensions of cultural praxis. Another example of this somewhat bland and uncritical liberalism is Verstraete's 'Township Art: Context, Form and Meaning' (1989), which formed part of a University of Witwatersrand anthology on black art production (Verstraete was a lecturer at the University of Durban-Westville). These texts are quite typical of the slightly ambiguous and condescending liberalism that competed with Marxist radicalism at the English universities during the '70s and '80s. While the impact of apartheid policies are recognised (but seldom overtly condemned or intensively investigated), these texts adopt a liberal paternalistic tone that by and large echoes De Jager's more extreme paternalism.

Later publications in a muted liberal style include those of Rankin (Wits University) and the prolific independent researcher, Miles. These two authors have been engaged in extensive and in-depth research to correct the sweeping assumptions that characterised earlier writings. Their thorough revisionist accounts of, inter alia, the major arts centres and, in the case of Miles, individual artists, serve to counteract some of the most invidious extant myths and generalisations by supplying detailed historical and factual information. In some of her articles, Rankin takes issue with dominant institutional and commercial practices in this field,²⁵⁸ but by and large neither of these authors provides new critical insights nor employs discursive or hermeneutical strategies that substantially succeed in overwriting the colonial text. The quality and rigour of their archival and field research is invaluable, but the tendency to remain confined to a narrow art historical paradigm means that the rich proliferation of race-critical

²⁵⁷ For instance, Jephson repeatedly refers to the policy of 'minimal interference' in white art teaching in Africa, but never adopts any critical stance in relation to this practice. In neither endorsing it (which would imply support for the culturalist notion of an innate and essential African creativity which runs the risk of 'contamination' by Western influences) nor opposing it (by proposing possible hegemonic and ideological reasons for this policy), Jephson maintains a bland neutrality which leaves some of the most dubious aspects of South African art discourse and practice intact.

²⁵⁸ Rankin provides a very useful factual overview of the major omissions and ideological biases in South African museums and collections (1993); and the problematics of the art market (1990). Also see Rankin and Hamilton (1997).

theories that emerged from other disciplines (such as literary theory, cultural studies and anthropology) have not been assimilated or utilised to offer alternative interpretations. Rankin chose, as a deliberate strategy, to avoid racial categorisations by writing on media (in *Images of Wood* 1989 and *Images of Metal*) that cut across racial lines. In choosing this quintessentially liberal option, Rankin precluded the possibility of actively taking issue with the axiomatic construction of race and difference in the South African art world.

Before 1976 (which heralded the 'struggle era'), the three most prolific and longest serving art reviewers of the English press – Cheales (*The Star* and *The Citizen*); Dewar (*The Star*) and Winder (*Rand Daily Mail*) - provided some of the most overtly condescending and questionable interpretations of black artists' work; overall Afrikaans reviewers supplied considerably less coverage of black exhibitions and tended to focus on the output of Afrikaans artists. Other newspapers that provided coverage of black artists (usually by anonymous reviewers) include the *Daily News*; the *Sunday Times*; *Natal Mercury* and *Natal Advertiser*.²⁵⁹

The tendency to view black art as a collective phenomenon meant that very few monographs were published on black artists before the 1980s. In 1951, Damant ('discoverer' and patron of Samuel Makonyane) published a monograph on this artist; and Savory wrote a very short monograph on Gerard Bhengu in 1965. Since the '80s many more monographs have appeared²⁶⁰ – mainly on the 'pioneer' artists who had largely been forgotten by the art establishment until their 'rediscovery' in two exhibitions that provided seminal coverage of modern black art and significantly impacted on subsequent research on the topic. Caroline Cuvillier (of the Pretoria branch of the Alliance Francaise) curated *Historical Perspective of Black Art in South Africa* in 1986; and University of South Africa academic, Steven Sack, curated the Johannesburg Art Gallery's *Neglected Tradition* in 1988. These two exhibitions (the latter much more comprehensively) attempted chronological histories of modern black South African art which sought to redress its historical exclusion and marginalisation from the national South African canon. These historic overviews occasioned the retrieval from obscurity – and radical re-evaluation - of the 'pioneers' (Bhengu, Mohl, Pemba, Sekoto, Mgundlandlu, Mancoba) and enabled a perspective on 20th-century black art production that emphasised

²⁵⁹ The extensive coverage emanating from Natal can possibly be ascribed to the activities of the Centre for African Art in Durban, which, under the auspices of the South African Institute for Race Relations, organised a great number of black art exhibitions in Natal.

²⁶⁰ See, for instance, Eichel's publication on Azaria Mbatha (1986); Miles' monographs on Gladys Mgundlandlu (2003) and Ernest Mancoba (1994); Arnott's monograph on John Muafangejo (1977); Manganyi on Gerard Sekoto (1996); Lindop (1988) and Spiro (1989) on Sekoto; and Langhan (2000) on Rakgoathe.

the heterogeneity and diversity of art praxis rather than the collectivity implied by previous group exhibitions.

Another turning point in writing about black art came about in 1985, when the much acclaimed *Tributaries* exhibition, sponsored by BMW and curated by Ricky Burnett, showcased the work of rural black artists that had never been displayed before. These art objects were clearly of a different order to both traditionalist rural material culture and to the urban art of the townships, and demonstrated a modernity that was experienced as fundamentally different to the Modernist works of urban black artists. Jackson Hlungwane, Noria Mabasa, Nelson Mukhuba, Dr Phutuma Seoka and Johannes Maswanganyi were self-taught artists who created sculptural objects for contemporary local rural markets or (in the case of Hlungwane) for spiritual reasons. The freshness of their approach and visual and iconographic novelty of their art rapidly found a niche in an urban art market already satiated by urban black art that showed limited signs of change or renewal – as will be thoroughly unpacked later. New terminologies and hermeneutical strategies rapidly sprang up to deal with this ‘new’ rural phenomenon. These will be briefly dealt with in the subsection on taxonomy and terminology.

While the above exhibitions all played a role in the discursive reorientation towards black art in the ‘80s and ‘90s, the 1976 Soweto student uprising arguably played the most seminal role in the establishment of a different discursive paradigm. After 1976, the art arena in general, and art writing alongside it, reflected an extreme polarisation between defenders of the status quo and anti-apartheid activists. New and radically critical newspapers - such as the English *Weekly Mail* and the Afrikaans *Vrye Weekblad* - provided cultural coverage that counteracted the pervasive cultural monadism of previous decades with a critical contextualism that explored the impact of the political system and market forces on art production. More centrist newspapers also significantly changed the tone of their reportage after 1976. Examples of these more critical reviewers include Ozynski (*Rand Daily Mail*) and James (*The Star*). More coverage emerged from the Afrikaans press, particularly *Die Beeld*, which appointed the reputable researcher Miles to cover black art exhibitions. In addition, new progressive literary and art journals such as *Staffrider* and *ADA* increasingly deracialised art inquiry by focusing on class and political issues that often deliberately eschewed race categories and cut across racial divides. Out of academia came publications such as Sue Williamson’s *Resistance Art of South Africa* (1989) and Gavin Younger’s *Art of the South African Townships* (1988), both of which will be discussed (and critiqued) in the next chapter as examples of the ‘resistance paradigm’.

Since the 1990s, the resistance paradigm has yielded to a mode of race-critical writing that can roughly be termed post-modern in so far as it deals with the more subtle modalities of language and representation. Much is published on the new generation of largely conceptualist South African artists who are enjoying exposure at major international exhibitions. This exposure is increasingly mediated by members of the African diaspora who, as mentioned previously, are keen to promote a competitive profile for African artists in the international arena and generally tend to ignore or disparage earlier generations of black Modernists. Contemporary revisions of black art production of the 20th century, however, continue to be written largely by established liberal white researchers who neither contribute new insights and perspectives, nor significantly unsettle the authority of the extreme culturalist models which predominated throughout the 20th century. While their work is valuable, there is much scope for a radical reconsideration of the practices, politics and discourses that contributed towards the establishment of a modern black art praxis in South Africa.

4.2 STRATEGIES OF OTHERING: A CRITICAL DECONSTRUCTION OF SELECTED TEXTS ON MODERN BLACK ART

4.2.1 Continuity and change in rhetoric and terminology

Ethnographic writing established expressive conventions and rhetorical traditions that have been remarkably pervasive throughout the late 19th and most of the 20th centuries. South African art writing, as will be shown, adopted these quintessentially modernist discursive devices to produce the modern black artist as simultaneously irrevocably Other and Universal Man; while reifying Western cultural and intellectual superiority via the authoritative voice of the white specialist. As Clifford (1986: 7) points out, any writer inevitably uses expressive tropes that are at least partly the involuntary heritage of their ideological, intellectual and social contexts. These inherited rhetorical tropes, Clifford cautions, do not so much translate meaning as impose and select meaning, and thus “cultural poesis – and politics – is the constant reconstitution of selves and others through specific exclusions, conventions, and discursive practices” (1986: 24). In this rhetorical construction of the authority of the writer, his or her personal voice, though experienced by the reader as a distinctive style or accent, is generally occluded by means of an assumed invisibility so that “the subjectivity of the author is separated from the objective referent of the text” (1986: 13).

Fanon contributed a pivotal perspective to post-colonial theory by proposing that the colonial diminishment and objectification of the black subject served primarily to enable white agency and a superior white subjectivity. According to Wright (2004: 113), Fanon suggested that

by positing the Black man as Other, the white man is himself able to come into subject status, bolstered by a language and system of thought supposedly based on abstract principles of truth, but in reality based on principles designed to justify and encourage the colonialist project.

Thus, Wright suggests, racist discourse relies on a “Hegelian structure that asserts the Black as a mere moment in the white subject’s dialectic of being” (2004: 113).

The rhetoric and discursive conventions adopted by the writer deserve scrutiny, because they often point the reader towards underlying contradictions or ambiguities in the text. Dubow (1995:17) points out that: “The capacity to embrace, simultaneously, logically contradictory ideas was, indeed, a key to the relative success of the race paradigm. This suggests a larger point, namely that ideologies may be more, rather than less, compelling if they are fundamentally ambiguous or even internally contradictory...”. The tendency towards contradiction – along with certain other modernist discursive characteristics - remained constant in writing on modern black art, while others changed as styles of reportage went out of fashion. Terminologies – particularly racial determinants – also underwent significant changes which must be considered.

The earliest articles and newspaper reviews (of the '30s, '40s and '50s) on modern black artists tended to be overtly patronising, and often displayed their racist presuppositions openly. However, these texts, as opposed to later writings, occasionally included the subjective ‘I’, ‘me’ and ‘my’ which willingly declared a personal perspective. An example from an English publication demonstrates the unabashed colonialist tone, and the anecdotal chattiness, of white press coverage at the time:

Connoisseurs and collectors are sometimes rewarded [in their search for good ‘Native’ art], but the general public is not aware of the scattered native work which is of so outstanding a quality that their product ceases to be a mere curio and becomes worthy to be ranked as art.... Art is a broad enough term to be subject to many interpretations, but there are certain accepted standards of judgement that entitle these native men to regard themselves as artists. Primarily, they have a creative urge, a desire to fashion something with their hands and

minds that is wholly their own. When you ask them why they do this they are at loss to explain: they know only that they had an onrush of energy that resulted in the work. ... Natives have so little sense of time and responsibility about undirected activity.... My impatience and irritation was compensated somewhat by my amusement at manifestations of the artistic temperament, native style (Hourwich Reyher, 1937).

No attempt is made to disguise the author's condescension towards, and prejudiced stereotyping of 'the native'. Elitist Modernist assumptions combine with classical colonialist presuppositions to produce a Native 'Other' that – to the author's amazement²⁶¹ - must be considered capable of producing an object that *'ceases to be mere curio'* and *'becomes worthy to be ranked as art'*. The deep-seated ambiguity of the Modernist paradigm, with its contradictory blend of elitism and democratic universalism, contributes additional layers of ambivalence to the colonialist tone of the passage. As a typical modernist discourse, cultural Modernism is predicated on the idea of a universal humanity (*'Art is a broad enough term to be subject to many interpretations'*); but paradoxically endorses the elitist, equally modernist notion that only the Western specialist (*'connoisseurs and collectors'*) command the *'accepted standards of judgement that entitle these native men to regard themselves as artists'* (while the ignorant *'general public'* fails to recognise these qualities). By comparison to these knowledgeable experts, the Native artist is *'at a loss to explain'* his own creative urges. He creates without deliberation; without logos or conscious control; he is possessed by an *'urge'* and a *'desire'* and *'an onrush of energy'* that compels this *'undirected activity'*. This irrational and undisciplined approach to the creative act produces, in the author, *'impatience and irritation'*, but also *'amusement'* – amusement at this incongruous manifestation of the highest of human qualities (*'the artistic temperament'*) in the lowest of the human species (the native with his distinctive *'native style'*). It is finally made clear that only the Western subject can validate the unconscious creative product of the native Other.²⁶²

²⁶¹ Note, for instance, the terms 'surprised' and 'amazed' in the titles of two articles about Hezekiel Ntuli, both from the early 1930s: "Native genius: amazing sculptor in city: Zulu love: models of wild life: praise from Princess Alice" (1930); and "An artist in clay: native commission surprised: model of lion for SA Museum" (1930).

²⁶² See also the following passage from another review of Ntuli's work: "The Native Economic Commission is making a special visit to Maritzburg tomorrow to *inspect* the work of a Native sculptor, 17 years of age, who has been *acclaimed* as a genius by *Native experts* of Natal, and who enjoys the distinction of being the only Native who has been awarded a prize at the Royal Agricultural Show. His name is Hezekeli Nutli (sic), and he is the *proudest Native in Natal*, for his handiwork *elicited the praise* of Princess Alice, who is now the possessor of four of his most *amazing* models of African wild life and Native lore (Native Genius: Amazing Sculptor in City, 1930) (Italics mine).

An example of early writing about modern black art from the Afrikaans press is Breyne's "*n Soeloe-kunstenaar*", from the Afrikaans family magazine *Huisgenoot* (1931: 26). The author uses early 20th-century Afrikaans racist terminologies such as '*Kaffer*', '*klonkie*',²⁶³ '*Picannin*', '*Soeloekaffer*', with no reservations or self-consciousness. The ingenuous tone of the article suggests that these terms were not used with a particularly malevolent intent, but merely reflected their common currency in Afrikaner society at the time. The same unselfconscious racism characterises the author's praise of Ntuli's sculptural abilities in answer to the 'commonly asked' hypothetical question: "What good can after all come out of the black *skepsels* [creatures]?"²⁶⁴ ("Wat kan immers nou goeds uit die swart skepsels voortspruit?"). The article also refers to the outstanding quality of a sculpture of an animal by this Zulu artist, which '*surprised*' due to its '*simple yet natural beauty and power*' ("Die diermodelletjie van die Soeloe het - in sy eenvoudige dog natuurlike skoonheid en krag ... verbaas."). While such overt racist terminologies and descriptions fall away later, the thematics and general hermeneutical strategies that appear in the two texts discussed above, remain intact in writings published as late as the 1990s, as will become evident in the course of this chapter.

A discursive characteristic of these early reviews that fell away in later press coverage was a tendency towards the anecdotal. 'Amusing' exchanges are often recounted, which reveal a level of dialogic interaction (albeit patronising and unequal) that was later negated in favour of a more 'neutral' and 'objectively knowledgeable' text. This shift from the particular and anecdotal to the more abstract and generalised suggests that modern black art praxis increasingly came to be interpreted as a collective phenomenon as it gained momentum in the '60s and '70s. The over-generalisation of the phenomenon in later writings, I will demonstrate soon, served as a very effective Otherising strategy. By contrast, the anecdotal detail of the earlier accounts suggests that the phenomenon of the individual black artist was still regarded as an anomaly and curiosity in the first half of the 20th century. The following article, again on Ntuli, exemplifies such a dialogic encounter:

His work has given him a keen insight into people's characters. 'You have much blood of Scotland', he told me. Asked how he knew this, Ntuli replied – quite illogically, I thought – 'You have face like horse. All Scots have look of horse'. To an American woman tourist who eagerly asked, 'What about li'l me?' he replied,

²⁶³ Juvenile African.

²⁶⁴ The term '*skepsels*' contains particular Christian/paternalistic connotations. The most apt translation I can come up with is 'creatures', but with the emphasis on the original Biblical (in Genesis) meaning of the term – that is, as one of God's numerous creations.

after a searching look: 'Nkosikazi, you have much learning from books; but,' pointing to her head, 'not too clever' (Zulu artist to hold exhibition, 1952).

In the '60s and '70s, writings on modern black art dispensed with the personal and anecdotal in favour of a more deliberately 'neutral' and 'scientifically objective' tone. In keeping with this shift towards greater 'scientific neutrality', authors attempt to mask their racist presuppositions by avoiding overtly offensive terminologies and stereotypes. Whereas the earlier texts wear their racist prejudices on their sleeves, these publications tend to be disingenuous, couching their racist presuppositions in condescending and pseudo-sympathetic terms. Particularly disingenuous is the way they insist upon the 'universality' of the Black Man and his Art while relentlessly overarticulating his difference – a tendency that will be thoroughly deconstructed later. As in the earlier texts, the terms '*native*' and '*bantu*' (and from the late '70s, increasingly '*Black/s*') are most commonly used to refer to the black artist, but blatantly racist terminologies (such as '*kaffer*' or '*boy*') fall away.²⁶⁵ In addition, the emphasis on the ethnic origin of the artist (which was particularly strong in the earlier writings) wanes as black Modernism is increasingly interpreted as a collective movement. However, the tendency towards a contradictory blend of cultural universalism and irreconcilable cultural differences that we have perceived in the earlier literatures, continues unabated in these later discourses. This ambiguity emanates from the fact that racialism has affinities with both relativism and universalism. Todorov (1986: 174) points out that racialism is relativistic in relation to facts (ie: the particular difference of each race 'culture' is overdetermined); yet it is universalistic in relation to values (values are assumed to be universal and hence a single set of aesthetic and moral criteria can be applied).

Most of the writings of the '60s and '70s articulate a panoptic gaze in which the 'I' and 'we', in keeping with the imperative to produce an 'objective' and 'scientific' text, remain off-stage. Trinh T Minh-ha (1989: 65) proposes that anthropology consists of a "conversation of 'us' with 'us' about 'them', of the white man with the white man about the primitive-nature man ..." . The terms '*they*' and '*them*' (or more frequently '*his*' and '*he*', through which the single Black Man is made to stand, metonymically, for the entire African population) are deictic terms in the sense that they are predicated upon the identity of an implied '*us*' and '*we*'. The inclusive '*us*' – strategically invisible and occluded in so far as it is never directly addressed - can only be the

²⁶⁵ Sekoto tells of one newspaper's response to one of his works: "This is a striking painting by a native house boy" (1957: 283). Scholz motivates her choice of 'black' because it has no "ethno-political implication"! She notes that "Nowadays an emotional stigma is attached to the names given to the different Black tribes in South Africa. Even the word "Bantu" may have hurtful, categorizing associations for some people today" (Scholz 1980: 8).

white audience attentively listening to the anthropological expert pontificating about the Black Man from behind the podium of the academic auditorium. The possibility that the text might be read or responded to by a speaking, reading, thinking black subject is evidently not conceivable. The Black Man is allowed into the auditorium only as spoken object, never as speaking subject. With an authoritative voice, the expert omnisciently points out the essential characteristics of the black specimen: "In human relations, feelings and emotions the Black Man is a person who can never be lethargic or uncommitted: that would be contradictory and foreign to his very essence and nature" (De Jager 1992: 206).²⁶⁶ These authoritative pronouncements "[produce] the colonized as a social reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible" (Bhabha 1994: 70).

De Jager's signature use of the term 'the Black man'²⁶⁷ is a significant Otherising device, and provides his writings with a distinctive accent. The singular '*the*' reduces the multiplicity and heterogeneity of an entire continent's inhabitants to one, generic specimen. It lifts the individual black artist out of the specificity of his socio-cultural milieu as he is made to stand, metonymically, for all Africans through all time. The capitalisation of '*Black*' transforms this adjective (in conjunction with 'man') into a single noun. '*Black man*' becomes one word – not 'black' and 'man', but Blackman. The capitalisation contributes to the metonymic reduction of the collective to the single person, by lending the designation the appearance of a proper name. By capitalising it, the adjective 'black' is exposed as much more than an empirical description. The use of 'man' moreover indicates the degree to which the text constructs modern black art as a masculinist canon. The use of the generic masculine incontrovertibly identifies the text as belonging to the modernist episteme, and compels an understanding of black women as the Other's Other. Bhabha (1995b: 177) suggests that "We may begin [to write the story of the nation] by questioning that progressive metaphor of modern social cohesion – *the many as one* – shared by organic theories of the holism of culture and community, and by theorists who treat gender, class, or race as radically 'expressive' of social totalities" (original italics).

The inability to conceive of a thinking black subject that is capable of engaging in dialogue is revealed in the paucity of interviews backing up general 'research' on black art. The excessive reliance on the authority of previous white writing (as I will demonstrate soon) and

²⁶⁶ Although it might seem strange that I use De Jager's latest publication (1992) as an example of typical discourse of the '60s and '70s, it must be noted that De Jager's various texts on modern black art essentially are all repetitions of his first major publication in 1973. In tone, rhetoric and interpretation, these texts are virtually identical.

²⁶⁷ It must be noted, however, that the capitalisation of the term 'black', while consistent in *Images of Man* (1992), was not as consistently used in his other publications.

the concurrent almost complete disregard of the black artist as potential source of information, indicates the extent to which Hegel and Gobineau's production of the Negro as pre-linguistic (and hence lacking in logos) continued to inform academic practice in 20th-century South Africa. When the black artist is allowed to speak (in the occasional rare interview) his views are often dismissed. A case in point is a statement by Scholz's student Tia Hugo (1980: 84) about the artist Ranko Pudi: "[V]erbally Pudi denies his African heritage but visually his works display that particular rhythmic quality found in traditional African art, as well as a thematic and visual return to his tribal identity...". Likewise Verstraete (1989: 165) dismisses Dumile's disclaimer of a political motivation in his art.

The extent to which the obliteration of the black subject can also be regarded as a white nationalist strategy is revealed by the following statement:

South African society at large was beginning to both seriously search its conscience [in the 1960s, as prejudice towards the black man was, according to the author, purportedly beginning to wane!], and to show a readiness to accept the contribution of the black man in spheres other than those traditionally reserved for him" (De Jager 1987: 210).

The Black Man, not being a citizen, is the Other of '*South African society at large*'; the Black Man is not South African, but African - he belongs, as I will demonstrate later, to the continent (dark, savage, primordial), not to the logos of the modern nation state.²⁶⁸ '*South African society*', however, has a conscience – it generously begins to '*show a readiness to accept*' the contribution of the excluded Other. The sphere of Art, not '*traditionally reserved*' for the black Other (the use of '*reserved*' clarifying whose tradition is meant, but also declaring white society's prerogative to allocate/deny space), is now generously opened to receive his '*contribution*' (black art as a gift to the 'universal' art world of the West). It must be noted that what is accepted is the *art* of the Black Man, but not the Black Man himself.²⁶⁹ In this regard it must be remembered that for the 19th-century race-theoretician Gobineau, the Negro was indisputably inferior in all spheres but one – only in the creative sphere, and particularly the visual arts, could the African come close to competing with the European (Wright 2004). It is therefore not surprising that a black '*contribution to South African society*' in particular, and to '*world culture*' in general, should have been acknowledged in the arts, but seldom in other

²⁶⁸ Note the implication of this in the title of Battiss' *A New African Art in South Africa* (1967).

²⁶⁹ It must not be forgotten that black South Africans were denied access to art institutions: Sekoto, for instance, recounts how he had to resort to subterfuge (pretending to be a sweeper) to gain access to the Johannesburg National Gallery, even though his own work was hanging there (1957).

spheres.

The following passage by De Jager (1992: 207) again highlights how the nationalist exclusion of the Black Man was accompanied by the ambiguous inclusion of his art:

The Black artist is of Africa and he is not separated and alienated from the very source of his existence. He is able to feel, to feed on, to draw from that for which he has great capacity for great sensitivity and understanding. Combined with this is the fact that his contemporary art has from the beginning been largely integrated with that of the rest of South Africa. His artistic contribution has always been part of the South African art scene.

Said calls this kind of discourse a form of 'radical realism':

[The colonialist] will designate, name, point to, fix, what he is talking or thinking about with a word or a phrase, which then is considered either to have acquired, or more simply to be, reality The tense they employ is the timeless eternal; they convey an impression of repetition and strength ... For all these functions it is frequently enough to use the simple copula *is* (quoted in Bhabha 1994: 71).

The '*is*' in '*the Black man is of Africa*' unambiguously declares that the modern black artist belongs to Africa rather than to the modern nation state. De Jager's next clause (*'he is not separated and alienated from the very source of his existence'*) suggests that to be cut off from Africa would entail traumatic severance and existential crisis. Africa is thus depicted as the nurturing Mother without whom the black artist would not be able to exist or create. He '*feeds on*' and '*draws from*' this source – it enables him '*to feel*', and it is responsible for his '*capacity for great sensitivity and understanding*'. While the artist belongs fundamentally to Africa, his '*contemporary art*' (not his traditional art, which will always belong to the primordial continent and never to the modern nation state), '*has from the beginning been largely integrated with that of the rest of South Africa*'. This '*integration*' is possible because the art is '*contemporary*' (ie modern and hence assimilable by the nation state). The national '*acceptance*' of modern black art is undercut, however, by the ambiguous logic of the passage which compels us to infer that the art, though '*contemporary*', is nonetheless essentially a product of Africa, since Africa remains the source of the artist's creative capacity and very being.

This passage is characteristic of De Jager's tendency to state the exact, diametrical opposite to what he implies. This simultaneous performance and disclaimer of a starkly racist view (in this

case - the black artist as ineluctable Other of white national normativity) will be evident throughout this deconstruction.²⁷⁰ The above passage also illustrates a discursive tendency that characterises not only De Jager's writing, but also the numerous authors who (as will become clear in the course of this deconstruction) drew inspiration from his work. The particular sentimental blend of Romantic essentialism and vague, fundamentally empty rhetoric serves to mask the racist undertones of the interpretation. This masking is abetted by the disingenuous device of excessively complimenting and flattering the black artist's exceptional talents and innate gifts (his '*great sensitivity*' and '*understanding*'). A close look at the first page of De Jager's conclusion to *Images of Man* (1992: 199) exemplifies this ambiguous blend of distancing and appropriation; of universalisation and differentiation; of flattery and racist stereotyping. The text is peppered with vague and substantively empty generalisations such as "South African Black art illustrates the enormous flexibility of human nature and human creativity and time will show it to have been a unique contribution to universal art"; and "One is struck in the first place by the Black artist's preoccupation with man, that he relates almost entirely in terms of the human being" (1992: 199). The term Black/Blacks appears 24 times on the single page; the terms human/man/humanism 16 times. The tension generated by this constant and unrelenting juxtaposition of 'Black' and 'human' suggests that the black artist is not regarded as a human who also incidentally happens to be black, but as Black *yet* human; or at the very least, as first Black *then* human. The sheer repetition of this juxtaposition of 'black' and 'human' suggests that the author found it necessary to *remind* the reader that Blacks are human. It also has to be kept in mind that, throughout the 20th century, general books on 'South African art', which included only or predominantly white artists, never mentioned the race of the white artist. This omission (compared with the overstatement of the black artist's racial designation) indicates the ubiquitous nature of white normativity in colonial and apartheid South Africa.²⁷¹

De Jager includes on this page a quotation by the anthropologist Raam: "How does the nature, the essence of man become intelligible through the created form? And the African artist's answer is plain to see. The essence of man, the very nature of man, reveals itself in his

²⁷⁰ This tendency makes De Jager a master of the backhanded compliment. See for instance, the following statement: "Township art and African art in general, have not developed an awesome technical and intellectual power incapable of communicating with the common man" (De Jager 1987: 212).

²⁷¹ This white normativity is particularly well illustrated in the following passage by Basson, which lists works scheduled for an 'overseas' exhibition of South African art: "The collection is representative of the greatest South African masters, such as Pierneef, Hugo Naudé, Cecil Higgs, Adolph Jentsch, Alexis Prellér, Irma Stern and Jean Welz, and includes the work of Black artists such as Leonard Matsoso, who won first prize for drawing in the 1973 Sao Paulo Biennale" (1976d).

emotions." This quotation reveals that De Jager's Romantic rhetoric and generalist deductions are not peculiar to him, but derive from a set of truisms and empty axioms that permeate contemporary anthropological and art critical responses to the 'anomaly' of modern art praxis in Africa. Raum's question: "How does the nature, the essence of man become intelligible through the created form?" was a pivotal art historical question throughout the 20th century, and indicates the extent to which the artwork was regarded as primarily evidential in nature. Thus the modern black art object was made to 'speak' ventriloquistically on behalf of the Black Man. Statements such as Basson's (1973) "His bold yet sensitive drawings reflect the African mind steeped in legend, myth and folklore"; or the following anonymous report about Dumile: "His work leads us into the world of thought and image of the urban Black man" (Artistic announcement, 1972), suggest that the artwork possessed *evidential* value of an innately African subjectivity. In speaking on behalf of the Black Man, the artwork is used as a screen on which the omniscient interpretative abilities of the white researcher are projected and an essential black nature is performed: "... through their art we can be aware of how our fellow residents in South Africa live and fulfil themselves; also to see in African society and the activities of their artists, the universal values reflected therein" (De Jager 1972b).

The overarticulation of the views of prior authorities and the concurrent silencing of the black subject was exacerbated by the segregationist practices of the apartheid state, which only allowed the speaking black subject the limited platform of the black press. The result was that the views of black intellectual interlocutors (such as Herbert Dhlomo) were seldom allowed to penetrate the white academic bubble. When several multi-racial fora for the voicing of counter-discourses sprang up after 1976, and the loud (and very angry) vocality of the black artist irrupted into the isolated confines of white authority, it was met by outraged hurt and disbelief. Thus, when Mzwakhe spoke out against 'white exploiters' in the oppositional cultural journal, *Staffrider* (1979),²⁷² Scholz responded with: "This single outburst seems to be symbolic of the almost incomprehensible attitude of quite a number of Black artists today, and must certainly be taken seriously" (1980: 142).²⁷³ Scholz's response reduces Mzwakhe's voice to '*a single outburst*', thus expediently reversing the usual metonymic practice of employing the single Black Man to represent the collective. Mzwakhe's views are defused by dismissing him

²⁷²The passage Scholz presumably responded to is the following one: "During the past 20 years, have black art and artists been in touch with the black community? The answer as I see it is no, not at all. The black artist has been working for or within the framework of the white exploiters, with their questionable promises that they'll make them great masters of our times without caring however whether the amount they give or pay for their works is enough to let them do better work and live without hassels (sic)" (Mzwakhe 1979).

²⁷³ She then proceeds to use Mzwakhe's protest as an opportunity to rail against the 'foreign diplomats' who 'rob' the Blacks of 'their heritage'.

as a lone exception; but Scholz's dis-ease about the threat posed by this outburst emerges in the contradiction that it is '*symbolic*' of the views of '*quite a number of Black artists today*'. The threat (of collective anger and revolt) is immediately contained, however, by typing it as '*incomprehensible*' (and thus implicitly irrational), which safely re-establishes the idea of a pre-linguistic African inability to command logos. Finally, the disingenuous conclusion that Mzwakhe's view '*must certainly be taken seriously*' not only contradicts her prior aggressive diminishment of this view, but also betrays the acute unease generated by the threat of the speaking black subject.

It is surely not coincidence that the conterminous coverage of modern black art provided by *The Classic* – which, as mentioned previously, was a black counter-discursive initiative – should have incorporated far more interview material and should thus have provided black artists with a platform from which to voice sometimes sharp criticism of white 'authority':²⁷⁴

Art Historians are like preachers. They say this happened then and that happened then and this is what these people say and that is what those people say. And when you go along after church and you say what do you yourself think? And he says 'get out of here you ruffian! (Dumile quoted in Simon 1968).

Dubow suggests (1995: 8) that linguistic 'keywords' or 'root-metaphors' provide a useful guide to understanding the influence and dissemination of sets of ideas. The frequent repetition of certain words serves to indicate their value as keywords and provides a clue as to the interpretative strategies adopted in a certain field. Often these keywords reflect popular prejudices or truisms, and indicate that authors do not necessarily rely on 'scientific' theories or anthropological and psychological studies to rationalise white superiority. The word '*discover*' (frequently used to describe the black artist's introduction into the white art world), is one such keyword. The press, in particular, seems to enjoy the sensationalistic implications of the term: "Hezekiel is a *discovery* of Mr. Stanley Williams, a well known Maritzburg resident, who now has him indentured by arrangement with the Native Affairs Department." (Native Genius: Amazing Sculptor in City, 1930); and "Born near Eshowe in 1912, Ntuli was 13 when a European *discovered* his exceptional gift and sent him to school at Pietermaritzburg" (Noted Zulu Artist is Sage 1947).

²⁷⁴ In this regard, it is also interesting to note that one of the few texts written by a black scholar, Koloane's 'The Polly Street Art Scene' in Nettleton and Hammond-Tooke (1989), includes lengthy transcripts of interviews to support his history of the Polly Street arts centre.

The word 'discovery' is resonant with modernist/colonialist overtones. Columbus 'discovered' America; amateur Western naturalists and explorers 'discovered' previously 'unknown' species of plants and animals that had been consumed, hunted or used medicinally by indigenous peoples for centuries. The metaphor of discovery celebrates, above all, the agency of the discoverer. That which is discovered is, by comparison, passive and inert. Mr Stanley Williams '*has*' Hezekiel indentured;²⁷⁵ and a European '*sent*' Ntuli to school. The object of discovery only enters history once it has been found (and named) by the discoverer. By definition, the discoverer must be a white European, since only the white European commands history. Although it stands to reason that the black artist and his work must already (at least), be familiar to his immediate community, he is not *known* until the discoverer finds him. It takes special sensibilities - a particular vision or talent - on the part of the discoverer to recognise the qualities that render the discovered worthy of discovery.

That the term reverberates with colonialist implications emerges nowhere more clearly than in the following passage by Basson (1973):

South Africa has so often been called a land of contrasts and the truth of this is certainly reflected in its visual arts. But for those sensitive enough to see beyond these obvious contrasts there is also a deeper unity; the bond with Africa, the mysterious continent, *still not fully discovered*, vibrating with slumbering power (italics mine).

Another Otherising discursive tactic, is a relentless overgeneralisation that eternalises and universalises a complex, specifically motivated artistic phenomenon as 'timeless' and 'homogeneous'. This is a colonialist discursive device that Said (1978) suggests enables the Western subject to de-situate the colonial Other (temporally and spatially) in order to freely theorise his/her essential nature. Thus most authors in the field of modern black art move between the particular (discussion of individual artists) and the general (theories about the essential nature of the Black Man) without any attempt to link the two deductively. The result is that the particular information provided in discussions of singular artists is often contradicted by the generalist introductions or conclusions to a text.

4.2.2 The construction of a canon

All these discursive devices and rhetorical tactics served to construct a canonical reading of modern black South African art that has remained fundamentally unchanged since the '70s.

²⁷⁵ Note the formal 'Mr Stanley Williams' versus the familiar first name 'Hezekiel'.

While the earliest writings on modern black art, as I have shown, tended to focus on the individual artist as an oddity or anomaly, the rapid increase in modern black art praxis in the late '50s and '60s compelled the art world to devise discursive strategies to deal with the phenomenon. If, as Oguiibe (2002) suggests, the numerous white administered art schools that sprang up all over Africa in the mid 20th century were created partly to direct and contain the threatening emergence of an independent African cultural modernity, art critical and art historical writing on the phenomenon arguably served the same purpose. If black cultural modernity posed the threat of 'sameness' - if the black artist was the 'proximate stranger' who began to look uncomfortably like the self - the discursive reception of his art was one way to reassert difference and to neutralise and contain the threat of cultural sameness.

One of the most distinctive characteristics of South African writings on modern black art is the constant reiteration of previous white writings, which rapidly established a canonical interpretation that remained unchanged for decades. A pronounced over-reliance on the authority of academic precursors results, ultimately, in the relentless reification of the same tropes, terminologies, interpretations and conventions – sometimes to the point of blatant plagiarism. Thus the same passage about the artist Sydney Kumalo is repeated, with minor variations, in four different articles. As far as I can tell, the passage was first formulated by Jacobs in *Artlook* (1973):

In Kumalo's sculpture one detects a knowledge of Western sculpture that is combined with a pure African vision which sees ancestral and evil spirits in each person, animal, plant and object encountered in daily life. His figures are not only contorted in design, but heavy with latent emotion.

It appears again, slightly altered, in an article by De Beer in *Bantu* (1974):

His sculptures, which are dynamic and forceful, combine a knowledge of Western sculpture with a pure African vision which sees ancestral and evil spirits in each person, animal, plant and objects encountered in daily life. He has developed a style unmistakably his own, using expressionistic, asymmetric devices to reflect his concept of a complex world.

Subsequently it appears in two articles by Basson (also in *Bantu*):

Kumalo's sculpture indicates a knowledge of Western sculpture combined with a purely African view that sees ancestral and evil spirits in every person, plant,

animal and object in everyday life. His works are not only distorted, but heavily laden with latent emotion (1976c).

And

In Kumalo's sculpture one detects a knowledge of Western sculpture that combined with a pure African vision which sees ancestral and evil spirits in each person, animal, plant and object encountered in daily life. His figures are not only contorted in design, but heavy with latent emotion (1977).

I will leave the deconstruction of this rather pungent passage for later, but it serves as an excellent example of the almost nauseating sense of déjà-vu one gets if one immerses oneself in the literatures of the '60s, '70s and even some publications of the '80s and early '90s. While few examples entail such blatant plagiarism, there are too many instances of substantial repetition to begin listing them all. Suffice it to mention that the prominent writers on modern black art during this period (when publication on the topic was at its peak), rarely consulted the source (the artist) or conducted fieldwork of any kind. More intensive research was undertaken only when and after Sack organised the *Neglected Tradition* exhibition in 1989a.

To illustrate the reiterative nature of the writing, I will refer to the most prominent publications of this period: by Berman, De Jager, Snyman, Scholz, Jephson, and Verstraete.²⁷⁶ De Jager is the most frequently cited authority - but he himself relied extensively on the prior writings of Battiss, and he widely popularised Berman's by now canonical and endlessly repeated description of modern black art: "Berman rightly points out that a new phenomenon appeared on the South African art scene in the 1950s – the work of the Black artist which can be classified as *humanistic, figurative expressionism*" (De Jager 1977b). This same description, often with the exact same sequence of words, is also used by Snyman, Scholz, Verstraete and Jephson (to include only the major writers).

The tendency towards repetition and reiteration indicates a reluctance to engage with the source, which could be motivated by the fear that direct contact could shake certainties and overturn convictions. It also indicates excessive respect for the authorial voice. Thus authors practically never take issue with prior theories or descriptions and tend to have only fulsome praise for their predecessors. Scholz, in her introductory literature survey on black art,

²⁷⁶ I exclude Sack since his writings break the mould by relying much less on prior publications. Sack relies on interviews and consulted considerably more sociological and literary sources, as well as writings by black intellectual contemporaries of the artists' concerned.

declares De Jager's *Contemporary African Art in South Africa* (1973) as the most important in the field, and praises it for displaying "a high level of art historical merit". She then endorses De Jager's primary conclusion that black art is characterised by the Black artist's "preoccupation with man" (1980: 5), and reminds us that "De Jager regards South African contemporary Black art as a reality which is unique by its very nature. It is art, in the universal sense of the word, but it is art with a very specific character which he terms the 'essence of Africa'" (1980: 6). It must be noted that this endlessly reiterated notion was first aired by Battiss in 1967, after which it was taken up by De Jager and so disseminated as canonical. Verstraete directly quotes Battiss on this: "Walter Battiss was one of the first to recognize the 'Africanness' of Township Art. 'It possesses a distinct African 'animus' or 'mystique', he says, 'that Europeans do not have in their own art'" (1989: 156). Verstraete also refers to De Jager and Snyman, while Snyman cites De Jager and Berman but also (which is less common) international writers such as Beier and McEwen (who, as I've shown in Chapter 3, expressed similar sentiments). The official state journal *Bantu* - as the most prolific publisher on the phenomenon of modern black art in the '70s - relied excessively (to the point of plagiarism) on De Jager's *Contemporary African Art in South Africa* (1973) and so contributed to the canonical entrenchment of De Jager's interpretations (it must be kept in mind that De Jager himself also contributed to this journal).

Sometimes information provided by the author contradicts the inherited truisms and interpretations relied on to bolster the text. Jephson, for instance, depends on De Jager's contradictory blend of essentialism and universalism to describe Sithole's art: "Many of his figurative works incorporate universal or humanistic themes that de Jager refers to as 'ritualistic expressions or gestalten of the sacred aura which surrounds African ritual'" (1989: 125). Yet the biographic information that Jephson includes suggests that this interpretation (which views Sithole's art as an instance of a typical African ritualism) is dubious, since Sithole was raised in the urban sphere of the Springs Kwa Tema township; he was the son of a Zionist minister, had a Roman catholic upbringing, and received tuition from both Skotnes and Kumalo where he became familiar with European modernist primitivism. The timidity, politeness, or downright laziness which prevented new authors from accumulating fresh information and/or making new deductions must be held responsible for the creation of a canonical interpretation of modern black South African art that still prevails today.

The direct transmission of an axiomatic interpretation of modern black art is particularly evident in Scholz's *Phafa Nyika* (1980), which includes a general introduction and conclusion by

Scholz but further comprises of essays by her senior students on individual black artists. Virtually each of these students dutifully applies Scholz's introductory interpretation (in itself formulaic and derivative) to the artist of their choice. Thus Scholz's declaration (via the Belgian priest Placide Tempels), that contemporary black art partakes of the African's 'vital force' (1980: 9), combines with a De Jageresque Romanticism to produce the following interpretation of Moyaga's art: "Moyaga's work is filled with vital energy as it strives to express the innermost being of man" (Bader in Scholz 1980: 29).

Another contributing factor to the canonical understanding of modern black art was the tendency to collectivise the phenomenon. Several complex discursive factors are at work in the collectivisation of modern black art. In the first instance, it is the task of art history (as a typical modernist discipline) to categorise, delineate, define, 'lump/split' and name. According to Preziosi:

Art history shared with its allied fields, and especially with museums, the fabrication of elaborate typological orders of 'specimens' of artistic activity linked by multiple chains of causality and influence over time and space and across the kaleidoscope of cultures (which could thereby be interlinked in evolutionary and diffusionist ways). The immense labour on the part of generations of historians, critics, and connoisseurs was in the service of assigning to objects a distinct place and moment in the historical 'evolution' of what thereby became validated as the pan-human phenomenon of *art* as a natural and legitimate subject in its own right; as cultural matter of deep significance because of what it arguably *revealed* about individuals, nations, or races (1998: 17) (original italics).

Art was regarded as having primarily *evidential* value. Art historians universally regarded their objects of study as "uniquely privileged in the degree to which they are able to communicate, symbolize, express, or embody certain deep or fundamental truths about their makers or sources, whether that be a single person or an entire culture of people" (Preziosi 1998: 21). Since black South Africans were systematically Otherised and ghettoised as 'proximate strangers' in first colonial and then apartheid South Africa, it stands to reason that their art would be read as semantic 'evidence' of their fundamental sameness (all blacks are alike) and as sign of their collective fundamental Otherness (to whites).

Berman (1974) played a seminal role in the collectivisation of modern black art by being the first to describe it as a group phenomenon with a particular character. While her designation

of the phenomenon as 'Township Art' was merely repeating what had already become common currency, she was the first to describe the 'Township style' as 'figurative humanist expressionism' – a description which, as I've already shown, was redeployed by virtually all subsequent writers on the topic.²⁷⁷ Berman's treatment of modern black art, however, attempts to situate it as part of the national body, not as something essentially African in contrast to a normative white South African art. She also credits the 'Township Art movement' for facilitating a general shift in South African art away from formalism towards a concern with more human themes.

The writer who most contributed to the perception of modern black art as a collective phenomenon was De Jager, who not only repeatedly describes it as such,²⁷⁸ but mainly collectivises modern black art praxis through relentless generalisation. The following passage, repeated with minor variations in all his publications, demonstrates such generalisation:

The Black artist in South Africa expresses himself in a general style characterised by stylistic exaggeration and distortion of form. This style is spontaneous and contains great vitality. There is an abandonment of naturalism but retention of realism. The artist aims at emotional impact by expressing inner life and by projecting personal emotion. Man and human values are emphasized. These are the basic ingredients for the artistic approach known as expressionism. Through this approach the contemporary South African Black artist also maintains a fundamental stylistic continuity with classic African art and African thought (1992: 200).

This passage contains all the ingredients of the canonical interpretation of modern black art, and thus deserves closer scrutiny. '*The black artist*' (an anonymous character who metonymically stands for the collective) '*expresses himself in a general style*' (note the tension between the individual act of '*expressing himself*' and the '*general style*' he uses). This style is characterised by '*exaggeration and distortion*' (the opposite of restraint and harmonious proportion). It is '*spontaneous*' (hence not deliberate and reasoned) and '*contains great vitality*' (following the Belgian missionary Tempels' popular ideas about the African's

²⁷⁷ Verstraete also uses the description "primitive expressionistic township 'style'" (1989: 168).

²⁷⁸ Like most authors in this field, De Jager's work shows a sustained tension between individualisation and collectivisation (an ambiguity that is unpacked in the subsection on subjectivity). But in statements such as "Here they are agents expressing the collective conscience of South Africa's black townships", De Jager quite emphatically declares the collective nature of 'Township Art' (De Jager 1987: 212). Verstraete describes 'Township Art' as "the first group movement in the art of the urban black man" (1989: 171).

celebration of vital force). *'The artist aims at emotional impact by expressing inner life and by projecting personal emotion'* (a High Modernist reading of the creative process as individual act – note, also, the foregrounding of *emotion*, which features twice in one sentence). *'Man and human values are emphasized'* (art as evidence of a universal human nature), which entitles this work to be seen as *'expressionism'* (a European Modernist primitivist style that utilised African sculpture as source of an originary 'primitive' human creativity). Finally it is proposed that the modern black artist *'maintains a fundamental stylistic continuity with classic African art and African thought'* (his work must hence be regarded as evidence of an inherent and essential 'Africanness' - and in that sense at least, as fundamentally different to European expressionism).²⁷⁹

Not only the style, but also the content of modern black art is collectivised. Most authors note the modern black artist's emphasis on 'his own people'.²⁸⁰ De Jager (1992: 19) makes much of this in both *Contemporary African Art in South Africa* and *Images of Man*.

South African Black artists have thus far related essentially in terms of Black issues and experiences. They have seldom attempted to portray experiences outside those of the broad society in which they and their people participate. The dignity of the Black matron, the beauty of the Black face and figure, the humour of African life, the Black man's day-to-day plight, his anger, his deep-rooted faith and attachment to the African soil, African essence, Black sensitivity, these are the things portrayed.²⁸¹

Although this generalisation inappropriately subsumes numerous artists (such as Louis Maqhubela and Dan Rakgoathe) who did not work in a figurative mode, it is undoubtedly true that most modern black artists (as would be expected) followed this trend. To state, as Berman (1974: 211) did, that "the primary theme of the artists concerned – which accounted for the designation [Township Art] – was the daily life and the surroundings of the black community who lives in townships on the outskirts of Johannesburg" is therefore perfectly accurate. But De Jager's generalised rhetoric and essentialist tone simultaneously naturalises the phenomenon

²⁷⁹ See also: "With regard to artistic output one can speak of a human expressionism. It is the author's belief that one can go even further and speak with justification of a particular and specific 'African expressionism'" (De Jager 1987: 212).

²⁸⁰ See for instance Cheales (1969): "One of the healthiest characteristics of African artists is that they invariably concentrate on their fellow beings for subject inspiration...".

²⁸¹ See also Basson: "The Black artist is pre-occupied with himself and his people. It is seldom that he portrays the experiences and life of people of other races and cultures. His art expresses his relationship with the world in which he lives. This pictorial comment on daily life and experiences in cities and townships, with its pleasures, sorrow and joys, is described as 'township art'" (1976f). Also see De Beer (1974), and Verstraete (1989). A particularly bizarre example of this is provided by Byerley (1965), who says of Michael Zondi's art: "All his subjects are concerned with or developed around a Bantu theme. This can be clearly seen in his study of Moses."

and renders it strange. It is rendered strange in so far as the focus of the black artist on '*Black issues*' is interpreted as yet more evidence that an '*African essence*' informs black art practice (and hence that '*they and their people*' are fundamentally collective and distinct/different). But – in so far as no attempt is made to situate this 'preoccupation' within the socio-political exigencies of an apartheid state that compelled segregation into racially distinct societies, the unnatural and socially engineered phenomenon of racially exclusive communities is simultaneously naturalised.²⁸²

While authors such as Scholz, Snyman and De Jager recognise modern black art as an urban phenomenon, the black South African urban sphere is rendered in such general terms that it is effectively stripped of its particular political character. It is neutralised as a 'typical African urban sphere' – its political nature as segregated ghetto or its peripheral status as reservoir of labour never unpacked:

South African black art reflects not only the African heritage but, within the context of social circumstances, contemporary Africa, as experienced by African artists in this southern part of the continent. In short, it reflects 'African images' (De Jager 1987: 209).

This evasion of political context contributes to the generalisation of 'Township Art' as an essentially African (rather than particularly South African) phenomenon. Thus, although Verstraete (1989: 155) points towards the townships as a political arena by claiming that "Township art is ... politicized by choice of subject alone, even if the aims of the artists involved were not specifically political", she reaffirms the urban sphere of the townships as a generic African space:

In its 'relevance' to life itself Township Art asserts its Africanness as an indigenous art form....Township Art, which is also inextricably bound up with contemporary urban African life in all its aspects, should, therefore, be seen as part of the

²⁸² De Jager does concede that the collectivity of much modern black art could be the product of a particular social context - but the context is never politically defined as the product of engineered segregation: "Black art reflects a South African reality: that we have in this country a group of artists of African origin who hail from a common socio-economic background, who share much the same involvements and who are consequently, to a very large degree, producing work characteristic of their particular society, its experiences and beliefs (1987: 209). It is only in his last publication, *Images of Man*, that De Jager briefly discusses the political background to the townships in the preface: "In South Africa the Black artist has for decades lived in a particular society, namely apartheid society. This socio-economic system has brought deep divisions in South African society and forced the various communities, divided along racial lines, often to diverge radically from one another in their life-styles, perceptions and values" (1992), and again, along the same lines, in a brief introductory 'socio-Historical perspective' on contemporary black art in South Africa (1992: 4). It is only in this publication that De Jager ever uses the term 'apartheid'.

mainstream of African art in general, in spite of drastic differences between traditional and urban life patterns (Verstraete 1989: 156).

It is significant that the social content of modern black art is described in very different terms in counter-discursive journals such as *The Classic*. Beinart (1963: 76), for instance, asserts the particularity of the environment Motjuoadi paints:

First there are the major characters and objects: the shebeen queen, the pennywhistlers, the tsotsis, the everpresent corrugated iron roofs. Then there are lesser people and objects: a man relieving himself behind a wall, a sleeping dog, a Consol jam jar.

In addition, Beinart recognises that it is problematic to regard the environment of the townships as a particular African 'heritage', and proposes that it was rather a poverty-ridden urban sprawl, the inhabitants of which had been forcibly stripped of their heritage: "But what do you paint if you grow up in a South African township with no particular heritage of your own, only something new that evolves out of the mixture of different people all living together in a crowded metropolis?" (1963: 77).

Rakgoathe, in his memoriam to Shilakoe (1973: 4) significantly describes this social focus as politically motivated:

He saw and felt the suffering of his own people at being victims of a political system beyond their own control. His pictures, "We Don't Want to Go," and "The Gate is Closed," are a bitter political commentary on events such as forced removal of people from places they have known for generations (Rakgoathe 1973: 4).

While it is necessary to note that the overwhelming majority of pre-'76 artists avoided overt political commentary, the *lack* of overt political content is never deconstructed as the possible by-product of a particularly repressive regime. In addition, the implicit political messages of some of the more critical urban black artists (such as Ezrom Legae or Durant Sihlali) are either ignored or euphemistically sidestepped. De Jager obliquely refers to the 'ascribed status' of black artists, but otherwise avoids any mention of political matters.²⁸³ Verstraete produces a list, in her introduction, of major apartheid laws, but never relates these to the artists under discussion, nor attempts to use this political background to interpret or decode the phenomenon of modern South African black art. Instead, following De Jager, Snyman and Battiss, she

²⁸³ "In sociological terms one could say that the black in South Africa has an ascribed status" (1987: 209).

reproduces modern South African art as 'a typical African phenomenon' that is essentially a continuation of African traditional art practices. Similarly Jephson provides a contextual background, but does not use this information to situate black art practice as a particular phenomenon dependent on and reflective of a complex and unique socio-political situation.

Although the term 'Township Art' ostensibly situates modern black art in a specific geographic location, the specificity implied by the term is in fact deceptive, for the word 'township' becomes a trope rather than a geographic designator.²⁸⁴ The specificity of individual artists' contexts is entirely denied through the overuse of this generic term and the spatial marginalisation of black artists is literally enacted by this labelling. The black artist David Koloane (1989: 211) highlights the painful connotations of the term 'Township': "... the systematic segregation of the township on the fringes of the major industrial centres was for the primary purpose of economic exploitation, based on racial discrimination". If the word 'apartheid' can be regarded, in Derrida's words, as: "the unique appellation for the ultimate racism" (1985), the township was the geographical enactment of that racism. As a term that refers to the impoverished and squalid ghetto satellites of the affluent white cities, 'Township art' is a geographical signifier that, in segregated South Africa, becomes a racial signifier. The specificity of the individual's experience of a particular township becomes a collective black experience of one, generic township. The township, metaphorically, stands for the collective, overcrowded, somewhat squalid and faceless Other Art of black South Africans.²⁸⁵ Clifford and Marcus (1986: 12) refer to Said's contention that Western taxonomic imagination often assumes visual or spatial dimensions: "the effect of domination in such spatial/temporal deployments ... is that they confer on the other a discreet identity".

²⁸⁴ It must be noted that the 'lumping' of modern black artists under the rubric of "Township Art" was accompanied by a process of 'splitting' that produced more refined categories to accommodate diverse stylistic trends in the 1980s. Sack (1989), for instance, proposed that "Urban art of the 1960s and 1970s took on at least three distinctive directions: an art of social commentary; the township style; and a modernist movement". Since different authors come up with different taxonomic suggestions for various stylistic categories - and since they all split hairs as to which artists must be included under which categories - I will not enumerate the numerous subcategories proposed by different authors or the debates around them. Oguibe, in his review of Vogel's 'Africa Explores', dismisses this search for fitting designations as a form of 'birdwatching' (1993: 16). A good example of this kind of 'birdwatching' is provided by Graburn (1976), who came up with the following tortuous categories for contemporary '4th world' cultural production: extinct art; traditional or functional art; commercial fine art; souvenir art; reintegrated art (synthesis); assimilated fine art; popular art; and the art of an artistic elite. It is significant that an equivalent search for categories never happened in the field of *white* South African art.

²⁸⁵ De Jager actually ascribes the 'collective nature' of 'Township art' to living conditions in the Townships: "[T]here is still much uniformity in the environmental and inspirational sources of the Black artist in South Africa. It follows that the South African black artist must share many common ideas, values and characteristics by virtue of ... their living together in densely concentrated populations" (De Jager 1987: 209). It is interesting to note, apropos this conclusion, that Sekoto, a South African artists who chose exile in Paris, told Koloane that his reasons for leaving South Africa was because he felt "isolated as a black artist ... I decided that I had to go to some other part of the world where there were other artists whom I could communicate with" (in Koloane 1989: 213).

It must be pointed out that the tendency to treat modern black art as a collective phenomenon was not entirely unjustified. Whereas the first generation of black painters (the 'pioneers') worked in quite distinct ways, the 'Polly Street generation' (excluding the first intake of very divergent artists such as Sydney Khumalo, Ephraim Ngatane, Louis Maqhubela and Durant Sihlali) rapidly acquired the character of a school. The same can be said of the artistic products of Rorke's Drift. What is seldom explored, however, is the role that white agency (teachers and culture brokers) and black poverty (the economic imperative) played in the construction of this collectivity. Whereas a number of writers mention the deleterious effect of the market on the commercialisation of modern black art, it was only in the late '80s that Sack (1989a) and Koloane (1989) raised the possibility that characteristics that are often assumed to be innate, could at least partially have been the product of white market demand, patron interference or tutelary guidance. While there is no doubt that repetitive 'township scenes' – replete with street urchins, jolly street musicians and colourful washing fluttering in the wind – still continue to flood a white market keen on picturesque representations of the Other, this phenomenon is not adequately explained in the literature. While some authors (Scholz and Fransen in particular) blame 'liberal foreigners' for giving black artists unconditional support, the market demand for these popular genre scenes is never systematically deconstructed, nor is the poverty of the black artist explored as a very real factor in the emergence of a canonical 'township art'.

Another stereotype – the popularity of which is perhaps more disturbing – is the distorted black body. Davies (1967) described this stereotype (somewhat judgementally) as follows:

There is a certain sameness about the works of African artists, which leads one to believe that they come off the same production line. [Indecipherable] the novelty wears off, and it has by now, the trademarks in their efforts are big feet, big hands, knobbly knees, distended stomachs and gross caricatures of the human figure ... A little sardonic humour would have given a greater impact perhaps, than this self-pitying turmoil [indecipherable] ...

First represented to great effect by Dumile Feni (who used it to make rather bathetic but powerful statements about the downtrodden black subject), the distorted black body was rapidly taken up by a following of young artists (such as Julian Motau), whose work developed a trademark style of contorted poses, enormous hands and feet, pathetic gestures, and round faces with big, round eyes and caricatural thick-lipped mouths. These figures were generally lifted out of any context and placed, in the style of ethnographic illustrations, against a blank

white backdrop. While this style is frequently described and generalised as 'the Township Style', no attempt is made to deconstruct this phenomenon as a possibly very fascinating (but ambiguous) subjective strategy.²⁸⁶ The degree to which modern black artists' distortion of the black body might be a form of counter-essentialism - or might conversely/simultaneously signify the interiorisation of the colonial stereotype - is not raised in the literatures concerned. Rather, the bathetic and mannered distortion is read as the continuation of an African pictorial tradition (and hence as proof of an enduring and essential Africanness); or/and as proof of the black artist's propensity (also innate) for imitation rather than innovation. Du Plessis (1983), for instance, proposes that: "In the genre of 'Township Art' it often seems as if every [prominent] figure such as Mbatha or Dumile quickly accumulates a school of inferior imitators. Battiss said 'In Africa, taste is governed by tradition, not experiment' [my translation]".²⁸⁷ And Scholz: "It would seem as if they all fall back on the kind of repetitiveness which characterizes traditional art" (1980: 15). In addition, the distortion is read as evidence of a 'spontaneous emotionalism' that reifies the black artist as pre-rational and incapable of logos, as will be discussed in more detail later.

As mentioned earlier, the canonical understanding of modern black art was substantially abetted by institutional practices, and demonstrates how inextricably imbricated discourse and phenomenal reality can become. A good example is the tendency of galleries and museums to display black artists' work in group exhibitions. The practice of displaying black artists as a group determined, for instance, the exclusion of the overwhelming majority as individual artists from Berman's definitive *Dictionary of Art and Artists of South Africa* (1983), since Berman used as criterion for inclusion only 'professional artists' who had had solo exhibitions.²⁸⁸

Numerous accounts moreover indicate that the white art world had very particular prescriptions and expectations regarding an 'accepted' black art practice, which most certainly impacted on the development of a canon. Sack (1989b), for instance, recounts how Samuel Makoanyane was actively dissuaded from producing images of white people by his patron and agent,

²⁸⁶ The caricatural black stereotype in modern African art (it is not only a South African phenomenon) is fascinating material for deconstruction. According to Wright (2004), Césaire commented on how white colonial writers involved the black body in a discourse of deformity and disproportionate members that reduced the African Other to a grotesque stereotype. Yet, as Wright (2004) points out, it is ironic that a similar distorting is perpetrated in the writings of the Negritudists, who used the mask synecdochally to stand for the whole black body and even for all of Africa. This suggests that the use of the stereotype was a counter-essentialist strategy or, perhaps – to give it a more complex nuance – the interiorisation of a negative, colonial perception of Africans.

²⁸⁷ The original text reads: "In die genre 'Township Art' skyn dit dikwels of elke figuur soos Mbatha of Dumile gou 'n skool minderwaardige na-apers het. Battiss het gesê: 'In Africa, taste is governed by tradition, not experiment'".

²⁸⁸ The result is that only 83 of the artists out of a total of 1670 are black.

Damant, and advised “to produce representations of tribal life exclusively, as this is what the market demanded”. It is not unlikely that Damant was right, and that white buyers would have responded uncomfortably to evidence of a black gaze. Likewise, when John Koenakeefe Mohl painted landscapes, he was discouraged from doing so since landscape was regarded as a white preserve (Miles 1997: 59). Sister Pientia Selhorst, a teacher at Marianhill Training college, declared in a newspaper interview that: “I let them do simple compositions with the accent on pattern; I let them do subjects that are African in character, subjects which they know intimately from their own lives, like women washing in a river, or children at play” (‘Nun Teaches Natives Art’, 1951).

The degree to which there were very particular white expectations of what constituted a ‘proper’ style and subject matter for black artists, was also revealed in a heated debate that erupted over the organisation of an abstract expressionist workshop attended primarily by black artists. The workshop was met with derision - its organisers berated for forcing black artists into an ‘inauthentic’ way of working (see Martin’s ‘Is There a Place for Black Abstract Painters in South Africa?’ 1991). The coercive pressure to produce ‘authentic’ African art is poignantly revealed in a letter Pemba wrote about illustrations he made for a book on ‘Bantu Folk stories’: “[T]he pictures represent some of my best work though my work is influenced by European art but I have tried my best to be typically African” (in Miles 1997:70). While the stereotypical nature of much modern black art is criticised in some of the literature,²⁸⁹ all these factors are never taken into account as possible coercive devices. Rather, the reiterative tendency in some artists’ work is exaggerated through the relentless overgeneralised description of *all* black artists’ contributions as belonging to this basic style and subject-matter; and is moreover used to substantiate an essentialist interpretation of modern black art. Despite the

²⁸⁹ Snyman (1978: 105), for instance, criticises the artist Macala for substituting the ‘subjective and existential realities that made Bantu-art meaningful’ and replacing it with a meaningless ‘decorative system’ (“Die subjektiewe en eksistensieële realiteit wat die Bantoe se kuns sinvol maak, het by hom plek gemaak vir ‘n objektiewe verhouding tussen kunstenaar en dekoratiewe sisteem” (1978: 106)).

Fransen, probably following Snyman, also uses Macala as example: “One of these [derivative] artists is Ben Macala whose style of drawing figures with round faces, thick lips and heavy eyelids has become stereotypes and – what is worse – has been taken over by many less talented artists”. (1982: 363). Also see Verstraete: “[imitation results] in the stereotype, which occurs whenever authentic inspiration and sincerity are lacking’ (Verstraete 1989: 169). Davidstz (1972) blames the repetitive stereotype on injudicious support by an irresponsible white public for ‘the Black Man’: “...die onoordeelkundige aanvaarding van ‘n onverantwoordelike publiek - veral wat betref die swartman...” She also points out that the ‘deceptive charm’ of these works must be resisted since it is often a greater temptation for the black man to imitate slavishly: “...aangesien dit dikwels ‘n groter versoeking vir die swartman is om slaafs na te boots”.

glaring heterogeneity of art categorised as 'Township', all the authors discussed relentlessly collectivise the phenomenon of modern black art by employing the same descriptive appellation ("figurative, humanist expressionism") to describe this 'general style'; Verstraete literally calls it "the first group manifestation in contemporary black art in Southern Africa" (1989: 152).

The tendency to collectivise black artists' work and to type this work as quintessentially African is arguably an attempt to contain the threat of a black cultural modernity. This attempt is continually undercut, however, by the Modernist imperative to recognise the artist as supreme individual. Thus Verstraete insists that modern black art should be seen as "part of the mainstream of African art in general, in spite of drastic differences between traditional and urban life patterns" (1989: 156), yet a few passages further cautions that Township art is not collective: "... it is essentially the expression of awareness by the individual of his existential situation in an alien and changing society". This paradox of 'collective individualism' occur in all the texts I have isolated for discussion, and can be regarded as the inevitable outflow of the taxonomic imperative to classify and collectivise the cultural production of the Other, while simultaneously valorising art as a fundamentally individual activity.

Bauman (1990: 166) describes the sovereign power of the modern state as "the power to define and to make definitions stick". He adds that "everything that self-defines or eludes state-legislated definition is subversive". The threat (of cultural and intellectual equality, and thus of a right to citizenship) posed by 'black' Modernism lay precisely in this act of self-definition. If the appropriation of cultural modernity was a strategy on the part of 20th-century black artists to challenge and subvert white cultural hegemony, as Oguibe suggests, this threat could only be countered by the creation of new definitions and categories with an emphasis on alterity and implications of spatial and temporal distance. The collectivisation, labelling and overgeneralised reiterations about modern black art must also be regarded as very effective strategies in this process of neutralisation and containment.

4.2.3 Africa as trope

As has emerged in some of the passages hitherto deconstructed, one of the most effective ways of suggesting the essential Otherness of modern black art is to claim that it shares with 'traditional' African arts a fundamental and unmistakeable 'Africanness'. This serves not only to link a contemporary urban phenomenon to the constructed Otherness of 'traditional' African art (as discussed in Chapter 3) but also renders it distinct from the white national art canon. Writings on modern black art thus tend to personify Africa as a primal presence of which all

Africans partake. De Jager, for instance, suggests that “what is being produced by the African artist usually relates to Africa in origin and expression and ... shares, therefore, many of the characteristics of the African world-view and philosophy (De Jager 1987: 209); Battiss (1967: 18) claims that “the new African art ... possesses a distinct African ‘animus’ or mystique, which the European does not have in his own art”.

The notion that a mysterious and elusive Africanness is encoded in all Africans and that the innate characteristics of this condition will determine all African cultural production, draws on a particularly colonial perception of Africa as trope. As Mudimbe (1988) points out, the idea of Africa – Africa as trope rather than geographical terrain – has formed part of Western discourse for centuries. As was discussed in Chapter 3, the trope of Africa is extremely ambiguous, assuming negative or positive connotations depending on the orientation of the user. From a missionary perspective, which regarded Europe as the bearer of the light of Christianity, Africa was produced as trope of darkness, ignorance and sinister superstition. From the perspective of the primitivist, whose disenchantment with modernity generated a corresponding enchantment with ‘the primitive’, Africa was produced as trope of spontaneity and primal freedom. Both viewpoints are held in South African art writing - often by the same author in the same text.²⁹⁰

Bodily metaphors feature strongly in the production of Africa as trope, which supports the colonial stereotype of the African as predominantly a physical being. Jacobs suggests that Kumalo’s artistry comes “out of the very heart of Africa” (1973), and Frank McEwen describes modern African art as “rising from the bowels of Africa with stylistic attributes, inborn aesthetic concepts in spirit and in matter, recognizable and intact...” (1968: 25). McEwen’s visceral metaphor vividly supports his claim that the stylistic and aesthetic attributes of modern African art are innate (‘inborn’ and ‘intact’), and his choice of ‘bowels’ is too evocative to be coincidental. Modern black art is produced, via the bodily trope of Africa, as instinctual, physical, base and resonant with vital force.

A particularly virulent example of the continued missionary perception of pre-modern Africa as nexus of evil forces, is provided by Jacobs (1973) in an article about the urban born sculptor Sydney Kumalo (one of the pupils Skotnes introduced to West African art). Jacobs

²⁹⁰ Walter Battiss’ *A new African Art in South Africa* (1967), for instance, ascribes the vitality and mystique of contemporary black art to its African roots, yet repeatedly comments on how a repressive and atavistic African tradition serves to stifle contemporary black creativity.

claims that Kumalo's art is "inspired by darkest Africa with its primitive, savage undercurrent, tribal beliefs and superstitiousness". She credits Kumalo with "a pure African vision which sees ancestral and evil spirits in each person, plant and object encountered in daily life".

The trope of Africa enables the writer to represent to modern black art as an atavistic phenomenon. By suggesting that modern African art '*rises*' from the '*bowels*' of Africa, and that it shares with 'traditional' African art a certain '*mystique*' that Europeans do not have in their own art, it is made abundantly clear that an African cultural modernity is not to be regarded as the same as, or even equivalent to, Western modernity. It belongs to an essentially different order. Although it might emerge from the contemporary urban sphere, it is the product of an ancient, timeless and fundamentally irrational primal force that is intrinsic and unique to the continent of Africa. Redolent with metaphors and dramatic descriptions, or couched in vague and sentimental rhetoric, the discursive construction of Africa does not rely on logic to convince the reader of its existence, but on the vocative and the poetic. Thus Snyman quotes Frobenius on the 'soul of Africa' and Van der Post on the 'Spirit of Africa' (1978: 55), and leans on Frobenius to substantiate the '*eiesoortigheid*' (uniqueness/true-to-itselfness) of the African:

This is the character of the African style. Anyone who has come close to a real understanding of it will recognize that it prevails throughout Africa as the expression of the African essence. It expresses itself in the movements of all negro peoples as much as in their plastic art, it is uttered in their dances and in their masks, in their religious sense as much as in the tendencies of their lives, national constitutions and racial destiny (Frobenius in Snyman 1978: 56).

The implication is that this elusive yet powerful essence of 'Africanness' is not culturally transmitted, but genetically encoded – it constitutes 'an instinct': "The style of carving is simple and uncluttered with irrelevant detail, and in the tendency to enlarge the heads we see the primitive instinct breaking through, to give emphasis to the object's importance" (Jack Grossert, 1965). Ntuli's patron, Dr John Holloway, likened his artistic talent to the "dormant energy which characterised work of the so-called 'Bushmen' who produced the wonderful South African rock-painting" (Miles 1997: 36). Hence Ntuli, a 20th-century Zulu speaker from Natal, shares with the geographically and temporally remote 'Bushman' a particular kind of energy. This shared African energy renders the African urban sphere distinctly different to other modern spheres since it is also infused with this intangible and elusive quality.

Likewise, Snyman describes modern black art as a contemporary manifestation of the consciousness underlying all African art (1978: 66). The idea that Africans share one, homogeneous nature is not only implied, but openly stated. Ironically quoting Senghor's counter-essentialist formulation of an innate black nature to substantiate his views, Snyman insists that there can be no question that a particular 'black consciousness' exists.²⁹¹ He also suggests, referring to Maquet, that 'the similarity' of all African sculpture 'proved' the existence of this essential African character, and that this character will be evident regardless of the amount of contact the African may have with other cultures. Lane, writing in the independent journal *Artlook*, suggests that the key to this Africanness lies in a collectivity that renders individualism impossible: "African heritage is born of a magico-religious society. Material reality and spirit are not seen as separate entities: nature and the mundane are one, gods and ancestors are one. An African feels he is immersed in a sea of forces which influence him and his group. Action is judged 'good' or 'bad' depending on the effect it has on the group, not on the individual. The vision of the artist is the vision of the clan. How, then, can he establish dialogue with a culture that is essentially individualistic?" (1972).

This discursive emphasis on the 'Africanness' of contemporary black art is not, however, without foundation, since it cannot be disputed that some black artists of the '60s and '70s produced work in a deliberately Africanist mode. There can be no doubt that the sculptor Sydney Kumalo and the painter Lucky Sibiya, for instance, based their formal language on a modern interpretation of 'traditional' African sculpture and design. The interpretation of this tendency as innate (and its generalisation to other artists, such as Durant Sihlali or Louis Maqhubela who never adopted this stylistic tendency²⁹²) is, however, problematic. The Africanisation in the art concerned can perhaps be more meaningfully unpacked as the result of a complex amalgamation of private and public forces and conflictual demands acting in on the artist: the white market's expectation of and demand for Africanness; the white tutor's own primitivist intent to foster and preserve an 'authentic' African idiom; the influence of a general primitivist trend in contemporary European Modernism; the artist's own African nationalist interest in the retrieval of a 'pure' African origin. Instead, the Africanness is interpreted as proof of an innate, African essence that duplicates itself regardless of the material circumstances or

²⁹¹ This graphically illustrates the risk that counter-essentialist pronouncements can be appropriated for racist-essentialist purposes.

²⁹² Lola Watter (1969) says: "Even at the beginning of his career as a professional artist, Louis Maqhubela had recognized the difficulty of incorporating the African tribal past into drawing and painting... His concern was not with the agrarian past, but with the urban present."

ideological milieu (or, for that matter, the aesthetic intentions) of the artist. It was only in the late '80s that Sack first deconstructed the 'Africanness' of the artists Skotnes, Kumalo and Legae as a conscious and deliberate Modernist phenomenon:

Their search for an African spirit was informed by the European modernist movement, which had likewise been strongly influenced by traditional African sculpture. This conscious 'Africanising' on the part of the Polly Street artists tended to depend to a great extent on formal references ... (Sack 1989c).

Thus the trope of Africa became a means of gauging the 'authenticity' of modern black art. Art that smacked of Africa was fetishised as authentic and was overdetermined as sign of the true voice of the indigene. By the same token, the black artist who pursued styles and methods deemed European, was often dismissed as insincere or accused of mindless mimesis. Thus Oguibe comments that writing on 'modern' or 'contemporary' African art repeats earlier fictions of Africa. Not only is the same racio-geographic delineation of 'Africa' repeated (ie, only including sub-saharan Africa), but the signifier 'Africa' is "only a cheap ruse masking other, less innocent referents" (1999: 324).

4.2.4 Taxonomy: the spatial and temporal logic of evolutionism

As has been demonstrated in Chapter 3, one of the most pervasive characteristics of late 19th-century and early 20th-century colonial discourse was the tendency to propose a progressive teleology of cultural development. It has been shown how Darwin's theory of evolution was misconstrued to serve as proof of a universal progressive thrust forward. The prevalence of Social Darwinist ideas regarding the evolution of cultures had a profound impact on 19th-century perceptions of African material culture, and continued to determine the way black artistic production was viewed and especially categorised by apartheid-era art historians and anthropologists. Because colonial discourse can be regarded as a subtext of a modernist preoccupation with progress, the conception of time in these discourses is diachronic (in so far as it proposes a unilinear development of human culture through historic time) and allochronic (in that it proposes an 'other' time frame for non-European cultures). The relentless linear trajectory of time proposed by the narrative of progress and development produces an Other that occupies an awkward position in relation to European modern history. Darwin's temporalisation of natural history, where earlier forms are regarded as rudimentary and primitive and later forms as higher and sophisticated, created an evolutionary paradigm that determined the dominant categories ("Traditional", "Transitional", "Township") used to describe (and interpret) 20th-century black cultural production in South Africa.

Clifford (1986: 112) points out that: "The theme of the vanishing primitive, of the end of traditional society (the very act of naming it 'traditional' implies a rupture), is pervasive in ethnographic writing." The development of a modern black art is therefore predicated on the inevitable evolutionary supersession of the old (tradition) by the new (of modernity). In a tightly knit web of dualisms that functionally support one another, the tradition/modernity dualism evokes and validates related binaries such as primitive/civilised, stasis/innovation, artefact/art, rural/urban and collective/individual, as the following passage by Sack (1989c) illustrates:

At this point in the history of the art produced by black South Africans we can identify two distinct streams: a rural art attached to the needs of tribal communities, and a newly evolving urban art operating at the point of intersection between the old and the new, the African and the European, influenced at first by Christian missionaries but later by the spirit of free enquiry that characterised the modern art movement.

The tradition/modernity dialectic is arguably the most powerful binary construct in writings on contemporary African art production. This dialectic is so persistent, its influence on the classification, collection and evaluation of African cultural production so enormous, and the tropes it relies on so durable, that it seems impossible to dispense of it without a seismic decentring of virtually all canonical texts on the topic.

It has been suggested that modernity stands in oppositional relationship to tradition – the two are thus often presented as fundamentally irreconcilable. This is particularly true when the tradition in question is African, since, as demonstrated in Chapter 3, the traditional cultural practices of Africa were designated as particularly 'primitive'. It has also been shown that most literatures on modern black art suggest a continuity between 'traditional' and modern African art practices. This 'continuity' is seldom proved (as an unbroken line of cultural transmission), but is rather assumed to rest on an innate quality of 'Africanness' that manifests as shared stylistic and iconographic traits between 'traditional' and modern cultural practices. This interpretation of modern black art results in a pervasive ambiguity – since 'tradition' and 'modernity' are mutually exclusive, the modern black artwork (which is represented as containing elements of both), emerges as an anachronism.

African tradition is rendered as savage, superstitious and irrational in literature on modern black art; and is made to occupy a static, immutable and pre-historical space. Battiss, De Jager, Snyman, Berman and Scholz all describe traditional African material culture as the products of rigidly prescribed and even repressively conventional social structures. Scholz's text provides an extreme example:

Through the chief, the ancestors jealously guard the rigid patterns of tribal behaviour. Any deviation from traditional customs shows defiance towards the ancestors and must be punished severely, even by death. This may be the fundamental reason why artistic expression among the Bantu tribes remained basically unchanged over long periods of time (1980: 9).

Not only does Scholz's account of 'traditional societies' perpetrate a colonialist myth of extreme tyranny and cultural stasis, but her use of the present tense implies that these social practices are still intact in contemporary Africa. True to the Hegelian notion of 'a people without history', the traditional African is naturalised and objectified as a primal being untouched by time. In the process, contemporary 'traditional' artists are portrayed as 'contemporary ancestors'. Scholz refers to an earlier thesis on contemporary Xhosa painting in South Africa to define African timelessness:

The African lives in a state of timelessness, where past and present are inseparably mingled, as all past events have become myths, in his historical concept there is no separation ... between myth and reality. This is the background from which the Black man has emerged into the European life-style (1980: 4).

The strictures and constraints of 'traditional' social structures are read as particularly damaging to the artist, who is compelled to create within the narrow confines of rigidly observed convention. Battiss articulates the strictures on the traditional artist as follows:

To the African craftsman the traditional way of thinking was a one-way course without change: arts and crafts remained the same over a long period: they were conventional. ... This timidity or conservatism is not difficult to understand, particularly in rural areas. Life there is still largely influenced by the overall tribal pattern of behaviour. And the overall pattern influences and can hamper even Africans who move to cities and grow up there (1967: 20).

Boonzaaier and Spiegel point out that: "The term 'traditional' has long been used as a euphemism for the labels 'uncivilised', 'primitive', 'pre-literate', 'tribal' or 'non-western' In the social sciences in general, 'tradition' has been contrasted to the notions of 'reason',

'rationality' and 'science'. They conclude that "The image conveyed here is of a 'traditional' African culture which is unchanging, homogeneous and communal, as opposed to a 'modern' white culture which is dynamic, diverse and individualistic" (1988: 41).

Progressive accounts of artistic development typically entail a quintessentially modernist concern with origins. A clear developmental path needs to be traced from a point of origin to a contemporary, advanced cultural manifestation via demonstrably successive stages of increasing complexity and sophistication. These evolutionist assumptions are indicated by the use of certain interrelated keywords. According to Fabian (1983: 17) "civilization, evolution, development, acculturation, modernization (and their cousins, industrialization, urbanization) are all terms whose conceptual content derives ... from evolutionary time".

This evolutionary trajectory meets with logistical obstacles when applied to South Africa, however. The assumption, which first arose in the late 19th century, that the peoples of Southern Africa had no art compared to the rich cultural heritage of Central and Western Africa,²⁹³ created problems when the evolutionary paradigm was applied. When a modern black art emerged in the 1930s and '40s, contemporary writings tried to reconcile this phenomenon with the black South African's apparent lack of visual cultural tradition:

... it is still a mystery how these people, with a relatively poor, extremely rigid artistic tradition, which is totally alien to the concept of 'l'art pour l'art', could so suddenly experience so strong an urge for visual self-expression (Scholz 1980: 14).

Scholz (1980: 3) actually uses Darwinian terminology to discuss this 'problem': "The *missing link* between the traditional and contemporary art of the Black people has not been established ..." [italics mine]. In similar vein, Skotnes (1979: 17) regarded 'the lack' of artistic traditions in Southern Africa as a potential obstacle to the development of a modern idiom.

The obsession with the origins of modern black art emerges particularly strongly in one of the first articles to deal with contemporary black artists' work: Walter Battiss' '*A new African Art in Southern Africa*' (1967). In his attempt to uncover the origins of the 'new African art', Battiss

²⁹³ This view is repeated in virtually all publications on modern black art. To mention only the major publications: Scholz (1980: 10), Snyman (1978: 63) and De Jager (1973: 17): "...the little artistic skill that did exist was limited mainly to wall decorations and their crafts such as beadwork, weaving, etc." See also Berman (1970: 210): "The cultural genius of the Bantu races was lodged primarily in verbal, musical and dance tradition: only in the painted Ndebele architecture had visual form achieved significance". Sack (1988) was the first to question this myth.

begins his inquiry with a lengthy exposition of the lack of artistic tradition in Southern Africa. Battiss speculates about the likelihood that South Africa's 'African peoples' are descended from Central Africa, and that artistic traditions were lost in the long, slow and arduous journey of migration to the south. Applying typical mid-20th-century hierarchical distinctions between craft and art, Battiss concludes that "traditional artistic skill" among South Africa's black population emerged *only* in the domain of functional crafts (1967: 19). He thus expresses amazement at the emergence of "new, fresh forms of plastic art" among black South Africans. Finding no traditional origin for this phenomenon, Battiss speculates that "they may have possessed an impulse to create which had simply remained dormant over a very long time" and emerged in full force upon "more permanent contact with Europeans" (1967: 19). A similar position is assumed by Cecil Skotnes (1979: 19):

They [black artists of the '50s and '60s] were shown the shapes and design elements inherent in the universal artistic tradition of tribal Africa, with the hope that there might be some dormant psychological link with their tribal past which could prove to be a foundation in which a 20th century artistic style could flourish.

This almost desperate search for origins indicates a need, which became increasingly common in 20th-century art historical writings, to establish an unbroken line of development in the art of the particular 'race' or 'nation' concerned; it also reveals a need to identify the 'new' African art as rooted in the continent of Africa. Preziosi points out that the concept of a 'universal' art spirit always accommodated the idea that each 'nation' or 'race' underwent this developmental process at its own pace and in its own characteristic manner:

As a component of the Enlightenment's project of commensurability, art became the universal standard or measure against which the products (and by extension the people) of all times and places might be envisioned together on the same hierarchical scale or table of aesthetic progress and ethical and cognitive advancement. To each people and place its own true art, and to each true art its proper position on a ladder of evolution leading towards the modernity and presentness of Europe (1998: 513).

African creativity is envisioned as an autonomous force that can be suppressed or altered by circumstance, but that will erupt as a new materialisation when opportunity presents itself. European contact is merely an 'animating' principle – a neutral catalyst in this process of inevitable artistic evolution. Thus Battiss proclaims: "Animated by European influences, the African artist gradually begins to move away from his geometrical designs ... to landscapes

and figures" (1967: 19). The 'new' African art, though modern in appearance, remains the product of a particularly African cultural evolution, in which the European's role as facilitator is vital only in so far as it serves as catalyst that galvanises and revitalises an innate African creativity.

When the cultural modernity of rural black artists such as Hlungwane, Mabasa and Seoka was 'discovered' and showcased in the *'Tributaries'* exhibition in the '80s, it was rapidly named 'transitional art'. Presumably representing the 'missing link' that authors such as Battiss and Scholz were so desperately in search of in the late '60s and '70s, these artworks were interpreted as 'earlier' on the temporal scale even though they were produced later than the indisputably 'modern' products of artists such as Pemba and Sekoto, who started their careers in the '30s and '40s. According to Richards (1987), the term 'transitional' was locally "... first used as a classificatory convenience. Dr Anitra Nettleton, African art specialist at the University of the Witwatersrand, used it to signify a change in patronage relations in 'African art' which produced a 'new' art for sale to a western market". The choice of term, protestations of 'convenience' aside, is surely not arbitrary or meaningless. 'Transition' has such overt temporal (and spatial) connotations that, even if evolutionism was not intended, a sense of progressive stages of cultural development is nonetheless suggested. If an artist is described as transitional, it can safely be assumed that the proposed transition is from tradition to modernity. Clearly, however, that designation does not describe a process that the artist is expected to go through in his or her own personal art development. The assumption is not that an artist such as Hlungwane started producing 'traditional' art, is now producing 'transitional' art and will therefore sometime soon be producing 'modern' or 'Modernist' art. The artist, rather, is deemed representative of a developmental *stage* (the transitional stage) that all Africans, collectively, have to undergo. The artist is, again, a metonymic representation of an entire African population that is compelled by the telos of history to modernise.

The 'transition' from tradition to modernity is believed to take place via a process of 'acculturation'. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the frequently used term 'acculturation' is the product of a relativistic cultural monadism, which suggests that individuals are 'encultured' into a particular world view and values. 'Acculturation' implies a process whereby the individual is torn from the safe confines of the cultural monad and thus suggests a loss of cultural wholeness.²⁹⁴ The 'transitional' artist, though effusively celebrated as a much more 'authentic'

²⁹⁴ Richards (1987) critiques the term as follows: "Of late discomfort over the adequacy of the word transitional has pushed some to suggest a replacement - "acculturation". Now that word *is* a political blindfold. The late Steve

African product than the modern black artist (as will be shown soon), is nonetheless represented as occupying an 'in-between' state; a 'neither-nor' indeterminate cultural condition which signifies loss and attainment in equal measure. The creative product of the 'transitional' artist is thus not regarded as a complex and whole artistic phenomenon which responds to very particular economic, political and social exigencies, but as the anachronistic synthesis of bits and pieces of the 'old' and the 'new'.²⁹⁵

The assumption of an inevitable, progressive march from 'primitive traditional art' to 'synthetic, acculturated transitional art', to 'contemporary, modern township art', signifies the modernist faith that modernity constitutes the necessary and inevitable culmination of all socio-cultural development. Even when the three art 'phases' are actually coterminous, they are represented as successive and historically distinct. These phases correspond to the Hegelian notion of a 'maturing' process that Africa has to undergo from its pre-historical, timeless past (either caricatured as tyrannical and savage or romanticised as a state of wholeness); to an interim transitional phase of radical acculturation; to a final state of urban (universal) modernity. This is implied in the structure of various general 'historical surveys' of 20th-century black South African art: in 'The Meeting of Southern African and Western Art Traditions' (1989b), for instance, Sack starts his historical survey with traditionalists, then discusses artists that represent the urban/rural interface (transitional); and finally moves to urban modern artists - although all the artists discussed are in fact contemporaries. Similarly Miles, in *Land and Lives* (1997), includes currently practising rural artists in her discussion of the 'early' black artists. Although they are the contemporaries of urban Modernists, their art is interpreted as 'beginning' a process of artistic development towards a modern urbanity.

Like the term 'acculturation', the frequently used keyword 'evolution' must not be regarded as a neutral substitute for the term 'change'. It is doubtful that a term so resonant could be randomly chosen – particularly in relation to African art, with its heritage of evolutionist interpretations. Unlike the term 'acculturation', however, the term 'evolution' has more overt

Biko wrote that it was "presumptuous" to describe past or current domestic exchanges between cultures as "acculturation"; and "acculturation" or "assimilation" emphasise the subjected culture's adjustment to the dominant culture. These notions do not register the subject community's resistance to colonisation, racism, genocide and oppression. They suggest fusion where fision, domination and conquest are the reality."

²⁹⁵ This is trenchantly critiqued (and expedient motives suggested at) by Richards (1987): "These are routinely eulogised as triumphs of cultural 'synthesis', the metaphysical occasion for telling juxtapositions, trenchant quotes and artfully eclectic healing. The new aesthetic liturgy - praising the trinity of rebirth, identity and synthesis- is dutifully recited by influential 'authorities' at art world initiation ceremonies (exhibition openings, prize givings, etc). In all this the fêted 'transitional' cuts a dashing figure. What special favours is it made to dispense?"

progressivist implications. Whereas 'acculturation' carries Romantic connotations of loss, the term 'evolution' carries triumphalist implications of the inevitable supersession of the old and the weak by the new and the strong. The term (as used, for instance, by Jephson (1989) in her headings '*Evolution of style*'; '*Evolution of iconography*'; '*Evolution of symbols*') transmits a sense of a single organism transmuted/mutating from a lower to a higher level of complexity. The biological/organic metaphor is significant – it indicates that the particular cultural phenomenon under consideration (in this case modern black South African art) is a local manifestation of a uniformly evolving 'African culture organism' - not place or time specific; not contingent on its complex environment; and certainly not the product of an individual creative will. By implication this 'African culture' is an autonomous phenomenon. Though it is receptive to the impulses of history (introduced by the European), it contains innate and pan-African characteristics that remain constant despite the evolutionary changes it undergoes in response to historical events - it is a member of a species that retains its species-integrity despite the adaptive changes it undergoes.

But the use of the term 'evolution' is also congruent with a Western art historical tendency to view artistic phenomena as partaking of an autonomous 'artistic spirit' that evolves of its own volition. This art historical teleology, as the art historian Gombrich (1998: 158) points out, arose under the influence of Hegel's *Philosophy of History* (1937), which posited history as the manifestation of the evolving self-awareness of a collective human spirit. This model, in which succeeding generations of artists facilitate an evolutionary process that is by implication teleological in that each new development has been prefigured or destined by previous developments, and each in turn generates an inevitable new phase in this evolution, reached its zenith in the mid 20th-century formalist theories of High Modernists such as Clement Greenberg. Greenberg has been widely criticised by Marxist art historians for his non-materialistic formalism, which suggests that Abstract Expressionism, for instance, is the culmination of decades of artistic evolution towards the ultimate realisation of complete formal autonomy.²⁹⁶ In this teleological narrative of an autonomous art spirit with a will of its own, the work of the French Realist painter Courbet, almost a century before the Abstract Expressionist movement began in America, is regarded as a stepping stone towards those artists' ultimate realisation of the will to pure form.

²⁹⁶ See, for instance, Harrison (1993).

This art historical method has distinctly essentialist implications when applied to Africa. De Jager, in his most recent and definitive publication on black South African Modernism (published in 1992), introduces the book with a chapter titled '*The Black Artist: Past and Present*'. In this chapter, De Jager provides a survey of the generic characteristics of traditional African art that is entirely derived from West and Central African sculpture. This convention - which is also employed by Snyman and Jephson²⁹⁷ - of introducing the phenomenon of modern black (mainly two-dimensional) South African art via a foundational chapter on 'traditional' Sub-Saharan African sculpture, presumes a teleological continuity between cultural phenomena that are temporally and spatially distant and that do not even share the same media or methods. Because South African modern black art cannot be linked to a 'traditional' South African indigenous art (since it is supposed that no such cultural tradition exists), it is reasoned that its origins must be excavated in Central and West Africa, with its supposedly much richer artistic heritage.²⁹⁸

The 'logic' of a progressive and unfolding artistic spirit presupposes that the 'now' has a 'before' to which it is linked. It is unthinkable that the modern could spring, fully formed, from a given confluence of historical contingencies. The origins of any artistic phenomenon (particularly *modern* phenomena - which stand, according to this same evolutionary logic, at the vanguard of a long process of development) must be traceable. Given the additional Modernist conception of art as the expression of evolving national, racial or ethnic identities, it is inconceivable that the origin of a modern African phenomenon could reside in Europe. The European presence in Africa - in itself evidence of a Hegelian unfolding of a universal humanity destined to become modern - is merely the conduit or the catalyst of an inevitable African progression towards the modern. The search for the origins of modern black South African art must reside in Africa. Like a palaeontologist assiduously digging for traces of the missing link, the scribe of modern black South African art digs for evidence of links between pre-colonial African art and modern African art.

²⁹⁷ Jephson at least uses as foundational chapter a discussion of local art traditions. She insists that: "In order to understand the evolution of black SA art in an urban context it is necessary to outline significant traditional black art forms", whereupon she discusses the figural woodcarving of the Tsonga and Venda, the mural painting of the South-Sotho, and the art of the Nguni-speakers of the (then) Transvaal (1989: 30). No reason is provided why she considers this discussion of traditionalist practices as necessary, however - it must be inferred that she assumes some continuity between modern (urban) and rural traditionalist art practices.

²⁹⁸ Du Plessis (1983) and Alexander (1985:4) are exceptions to this rule. Both question this illogical presupposition. Du Plessis suggests that "There is no evidence that they [contemporary black artists] represent a continuous tradition" ("Daar is geen getuienis dat hulle in 'n deurlopende tradisie staan nie"), and Alexander suggests that "It is naïve to assume a continuity between the traditional art of Africa and the creative expression of urban black artists."

Since this proposed continuity between modern South African art and 'traditional' Central and West African art, by virtue of geographic and temporal distance, cannot be a matter of direct transmission, one can only infer that the logic of that transmission and continuity rests in an ineffable quality of Africanness shared by all Africans - modern or traditional - from all parts of the sub-Saharan continent. As mentioned before, this was first overtly stated by Battiss (1967: 18): "[T]he new African art ... possesses a distinct African 'animus' or mystique, which the European does not have in his own art". The inevitable conclusion is that modern Africans, from every part of the Sub-Saharan continent, are first and foremost the unconscious carriers and transmitters of the 'Africa gene' of their ancestors.

The biological metaphor of a 'species' of art that undergoes evolutionary changes (from rudimentary beginnings to increasingly more complex and sophisticated solutions) impels a reading of earlier forms of cultural modernity as crude, clumsy, childlike and half-formed. Thus the 'pioneers', whose work generally evinced considerable subtlety and formal sophistication, had to be interpreted as the childlike beginnings of a gradual development towards mature sophistication. In accordance with this evaluation, so frequently reiterated in the literature, the black artist and writer David Koloane (in his address at the *Historical Perspective of Black Art* exhibition in 1986), suggested that the exhibition: "... highlights the aesthetic expansion of the Black artist from this naïve, untutored beginnings exemplified in the work of Bhengu, Sekoto, Mohl and Pemba". Similarly, Snyman repeatedly notes the clumsiness and crudeness of the pioneers' efforts compared to the (relative) sophistication of the later generation of modern black artists (1978: 85-87).

One of the most important consequences of the tradition/modernity dialectic is the 'two-worlds' interpretation of modern black art, which views the black artist as torn between two mutually incompatible worlds (this will be thoroughly unpacked in the next subsection on identity and subjectivity). The 'world of tradition' is the realm of the artist's innate African 'essence' – an essence that manifests in his art as an unmistakable primitive flavour - but the 'world of the modern' is the imported world of the European without which a modern black art would not have come to fruition. Although the African feels estranged, alienated and bewildered by this world, it afforded him the freedom to break with traditional strictures and to exercise his innovative powers to create a quintessentially African cultural modernity. Tradition, it is implied, will inevitably be superseded by modernity. Europe, as the vanguard of modernity, acts as catalyst or inspiration for an African modernity that nonetheless, finally, manifests as an

atavistically 'traditional' phenomenon in so far as it retains essential African characteristics that continuously defer the attainment of a fully realised modernity.

If a continuous evolution is proposed from 'traditional' to 'transitional' to 'modern' art, it is nonetheless implied that the 'modern' identity of the black artist – as will be demonstrated later – is not equivalent to the modern identity of the artist of European descent. His art remains, always, a *synthesis* of tradition and modernity – and more often than not (it is suggested), an unsatisfactory or clumsy synthesis. The contemporary urban black artist's adoption of 'the modern' is read as a superficial and mannered 'pretence' at modernity – as a thin overlay of sophistication over a base level of irreducible primitiveness. This might explain why the art of the 'transitionals' was received as a much more 'authentic' cultural phenomenon – a more satisfactory, sincere and spontaneous synthesis of the traditional and the modern:

Suddenly a whole tradition of Black art, based in and responding to the conflict of indigenous traditions and the imperialistic violences of Western culture, came to light when Ricky Burnett discovered rural artists like Nelson Makhuba and Doctor Patuma Seoka. Suddenly it became obvious that township styles were not only trivial but also monstrous inventions of white entrepreneurs, designed only to comfort white liberals and to make gallery owners richer (Powell 1986a).

The putative 'sincerity' of 'transitional' art rests, according to Powell (1986b) in the fact that it developed of its own accord: "Much more important, though, was the sudden realisation that there is an indigenous, independent and vital art in South Africa and that it has been flourishing for years, unheeded by and regardless of the machinations of the art world in general." The commercialisation of urban black art is seen as a contaminating force,²⁹⁹ and is allegorised as a loss of innocence: "While this state of innocence is obviously not available to anybody who has lived long in the cities, the message is clear enough: bad faith equals bad art" (1986b). Thus, the spontaneous 'transitional' art of the rural sphere is represented as an '*innocent*', and hence '*authentic*' manifestation of the conflicts inherent to the 'two-worlds' syndrome: "In a work like this the spiritual suspension that characterises the situation of black culture, the conflict of the inherited and the new realities, finds a poignant, illuminating and

²⁹⁹Powell (1986b) ascribes the 'insincerity' of Township Art to the demands of the white market: "The problem with so-called township art has always been that one never really believed it came out of the townships in the first place. As a style is always lacked commitment, authenticity, any real sense of belonging to the people whose experience of the world it supposedly represented."; "And being white, affluent, liberal and, above all, South African (therefore essentially threatened by its own ignorance of the true nature of black experience), its market wants desperately to be fed certain messages - messages that suit itself."; "These understandings of the African and the primitive the teachers at Polly Street and similar institutions duly disseminated and, after a short and painless gestation, the township style, an infant in the great family of European modernism, was born."

authentic expression" (1986b).³⁰⁰ In another publication Powell, in similar Hegelian mode, ascribes the '*authenticity*' of 'transitional art' to the artists' "freedom from ... the anxieties of historical self-consciousness" (1985: 47). Koloane criticises the evolutionary implications of this celebratory reception of the 'transitional' artists:

The work of these artists was perceived as the missing link in the romantic notion that combined traces of the old with the new. A magic realm of mythology was woven around the artists and their environments by White art reviewers, researchers and spurious dealers. The fact that these artists were obviously untutored in the Western mould enhanced the abounding myth (1999: 330)

The evolutionist paradigm – which borrows from both a social Darwinist concept of inevitable stages of cultural development and a Hegelian concept of an autonomously developing art spirit – thus exerted a powerful influence on the hermeneutical logic underlying both the classification and interpretation of modern black art. Oguibe suggests that, once we dispense of Africa as trope the "'transition' from 'antiquity' to the modern ceases to amaze and exoticise or evoke voyeuristic admiration or pity because antiquity ceases to exist". He points out that: "The supposed distress of Africans caught in a no-man's land between Europe and their 'authentic' selves becomes a lot more difficult to locate or explicate" (1999: 325).

4.2.5 Modern black identity in South African art writing

The construction of a modern black subjectivity in South African art writing is rife with ambivalence. The conflicting discourses and often contradictory beliefs that contribute towards this complexly ambiguous construct include the Enlightenment valorisation of the individual; the notion of an autonomously developing art spirit; a High Modernist romanticisation of the artist as supremely gifted and anguished visionary; a stereotypical view of the traditional African 'mind'; the presumed collective identity of Africans; the anxiety and displacement wrought by a putative process of acculturation; and a 'two-worlds' paradigm that sees contemporary Africans as torn between fundamentally incompatible worlds.

4.2.5.1 *The 'two-worlds paradigm': the black artist's identity as lack and excess*

³⁰⁰ Richards (1987) is much more sceptical about the celebratory tone accompanying the 'discovery' of the 'transitionals': "It still provides fresh satisfaction for the cult of the exotic without letting go of that crucial ingredient: 'The primitive'. Simple formal pictorial mixing of the 'modern' and the 'primitive' pretends universality. Aesthetic unification purports to transcend all difference, mysteriously repairing rents in the cultural fabric. 'Synthesis' is invisible mending."

Most of these conflicting discourses come into play in the dominant hermeneutical practice of interpreting the black artist as torn between 'two worlds'. As briefly discussed in Chapter 3, the subjectivity of the modern black artist is represented as fundamentally schizoid in that it participates simultaneously in two distinct mindsets: "Europe and Africa - the twin poles of the African artist's imagination" as Ozynski (1977) puts it. These 'twin poles' are represented as fundamentally irreconcilable, if not downright antagonistic. This view rests on a typological conception of time (see Chapter 3.3), in which absolute distinctions are made between preliterate and literate societies. Their combination is consequently often articulated as a problematic confrontation – with all the aggressive implications that this word encodes.³⁰¹ Hence Werth, director of the Pretoria Art gallery, stated that:

The opinion is often voiced that this 'confrontation' of the first and the third world, in all spheres of life, has been the cause of most of the countless problems that have beset this southern tip of Africa over the last three hundred years. At present we are still trying to find ways and means by which we can shape these two worlds into peaceful and fruitful coexistence (1987: 32).³⁰²

The 'two-worlds syndrome' is typically inscribed by Basson as "the confrontation in Africa between Man living in a semi primitive state and man, highly skilled in science and technology, living in highly civilized modern cities" (1973).³⁰³ The modern black artist (in this case Leonard Matsoso) embodies the trauma of this highly unequal '*confrontation*': "His bold yet sensitive drawings reflect the African mind steeped in legend, myth and folklore, but at the same time a mind confronted by the sophistication of modern urban life and battling to come to terms with it" (Basson 1973). The Kantian distinction between pre-modern *doxa* (indicated by the words '*legend*', '*myth*' and '*folklore*') and Western *logos* ('*the sophistication of modern urban life*') means that the modern black artist, with his distinctly '*African mind*', '*battles to come to terms*' with these fundamentally conflicting mental states. Since the African traditional mind and Western modern sophistication must be regarded as mutually exclusive, the black artist finds the confrontation between these dialectical opposites '*a battle*' - he does not command or master a mind of his own, but again metonymically stands for the traumatic dislocation that all

³⁰¹ The *Reader's Digest Oxford Complete Wordfinder* (1993: 300) provides as first definition of the term 'confrontation' the following: "face in hostility or defiance".

³⁰² See also: "It is always a great problem, to fuse traditional African art with the modern idiom; but it is triumphantly overcome by Nicholas Mukomberawa (Goodman), a Shona who lives near Salisbury" (Coulson: 1977).

³⁰³ Another example is the following statement by Lane (1972): "Today, as the African small scale society meets the European large scale, it seems to manifest a startling consciousness and energy. This has given it a unity which stems from magic and religion but stares technology in the face".

Africans have to undergo in order to attain modern identities.³⁰⁴ It is thus assumed that the identity of the urbanised black man is forged by displacement and loss. The 'modern black man' is the confused, childlike and bewildered victim of the modern world, not the 'master of his fate' in the tradition of heroic, enlightenment subjectivity: "He has not only lost his tribal identity, but has had to come to terms with an urban society which is not of his making and in which he has little self-determination" (Verstraete 1989: 153).

The 'neither-nor' status of the modern black artist generates an extremely conflicted and alienated subject:

Like so many other rural blacks who come to the urban township environment, Dumile was confronted with the dilemma of adapting to a modern, rapidly evolving, urban society which challenged his traditional African life style and cultural values. For Dumile there was no escape or return to the lost primeval paradise sought after by Gauguin, Nolde, Pechstein and other early 20th-century European artists. The black man is trapped between two traditions and two heritages: although he is confronted with rootlessness and anomie in the urban environment, the inevitable process of westernization is rarely reversed. The feelings of insecurity, tension and anguish which accompany such a situation are reflected in both the style and content of Dumile's work and all the 'expressionistic' township Art (Verstraete 1989: 158).

The evocative use of the word '*trapped*' dramatises the black artist as passive victim caught between two conflicting cultural systems. Dumile's anguished art is presented as evidence of the losses and confusion accompanying the '*inevitable*' and '*irreversible*' process of acculturation: "The mother and child theme so often used in Township art, loses its traditional cosmological significance and becomes an image of pathos, a memory of a lost unity" (Verstraete 1989:160). And also: "The emptiness surrounding the figure suggests the absence of any social framework in which old or young could find any meaningful place" (1989: 160).

Verstraete's interpretation of Dumile's art as symptomatic of a typical 'two-worlds' displacement, presents an ideal opportunity to explore the reductiveness of this paradigm. Biographical information about Dumile suggests that Verstraete's clichéd and convenient

³⁰⁴ An anonymous reviewer concludes, based on hearsay, that Motjuoadi suffered from such a 'split personality': "Very few people in the art world ever met Motjuoadi and those who did described him as a strange man. He was well-educated and studying for a BSc at the University of the North. Mingled with this aspect was a 'primitive' and unsophisticated quality" (The Artist of the Townships, 1972).

interpretation contradicts the particularity of his experiences. Her interpretation rests, for instance, on the assumption that all 20th-century Africans compress, in their lifetimes, centuries of evolutionary development from '*the lost primeval paradise*' of traditional rural life to the advanced '*rapidly evolving*' modernity of urban, Western lifestyles. The tendency to theorise modern black culture as symptomatic of the loss of one identity and the gradual (and partial) accrual of another, is thus predicated on the often unfounded presumption that the modern black artist emerged from '*a traditional African life style and cultural values*'. Dumile was, in fact, born in the rural town of Worcester, and moved with his father to the city of Cape Town when he was six and to Johannesburg when he was eleven. The complex and changeable rural environment (in this case the reasonably big agricultural centre of Worcester) is erroneously read as a 'traditional' African sphere. Add to this the fact that Dumile's father was a Christian preacher and trader, and Verstraete's comments about his 'traditional background' are revealed as nothing more than bald assumption.

The reductive 'two-worlds' theory of modern black subjectivity rests on the outdated anthropological notion that individual subjectivities are entirely shaped by their particular cultural monad of origin, and that the loss of this encultured existence generates a conflicted identity characterised by deprivation and bewilderment. This interpretation of Dumile is typical of apartheid-era discourse in so far as it forfeits the opportunity to undertake a thick description of the artist's singular socio-economic context via interviews and empirical research. The application of more critical anthropological theories (it must be remembered that Verstraete's text was published in the late '80s) might also have problematised the urban/rural interface as an irreducibly complex phenomenon that generated intricate subjective modalities.³⁰⁵

The tendency to 'read into' modern black art evidence of an alienated and deeply divided black identity, suggests that the modern black artist, by virtue of innate characteristics, can never be fully 'at home' in the modern sphere of the city (and by extension, in the sphere of modern culture). Thus the art reporter for *The Star*, Richard Cheales (1971c) suggested that "In this space age, the African child must find childhood far more mentally complicated and

³⁰⁵ Rather than necessarily signifying '*being trapped between two traditions and two heritages*', Dumile's disturbing subject matter may thus be more meaningfully interpreted as rooted in the trauma of his mother's death when he was six; and/or as the exorcism of his personal experiences in the impoverished urban ghettos he grew up in; and/or as complexly ambiguous strategies to deal with a dehumanising system. On a more nuanced psychotherapeutic level, his self-Otherising style might be interpreted as the tragic internalisation of a colonial stereotype, and/or as a counter-essentialist strategy.

bewildering than does the White child". Since both children are raised in the city, the inference must be that the black child, by virtue of being African, does not have the white child's innate mental ability to cope with an urban (modern) upbringing. In similar vein, the 'acculturated' black artist, who does not belong by birthright to the modern world introduced by the European, is seen as only capable of a superficial and mannered adoption of modern characteristics. Thus Grossert (1965) said of South African black church art:

The idiom which is used is African in character, even though in many aspects of life in the post-tribal period in which our South African Bantu, particularly, find themselves, many pseudo features, if I may call them such, have appeared, in strange imitative art forms and in new behavioural patterns. It is interesting to see that the forthright character of the traditional Bantu races does come through in their religious art.

Terms such as *'pseudo features'*, *'strange imitative art'*, *'new behavioural patterns'* all suggest that the contemporary black artist can, at best, achieve a mere temporary mimeses of cultural modernity. Despite this *'pseudo'* modernity, however, the innate (*'forthright'*) character of the traditional African will always manifest. It is therefore the 'Africanness' of the modern black artist that signifies his success and authenticity, while his 'European' characteristics are often interpreted as dilettantish and inauthentic. In Snyman's thesis, for instance, the aspects of Sekoto and Pemba's art that he regards as negative ('illustrative, narrative, dilettantish, superficial and mannered'³⁰⁶), are ascribed to a corruptive European influence, while what he regards as the positive aspects of the art: the 'illogical' spatial conception and the 'spontaneity' and 'urgency' of colour, are described as characteristically African (1978: 88).³⁰⁷ He concludes that the early contributions to contemporary 'Bantu-art' are characterised by a superficial imitation of the Western tradition in painting³⁰⁸ - a notion that will be explored in more depth in the subsection on white teaching.

³⁰⁶ "Seen against the background of his cultural difference, the artist often approached the European influence materially and formalistically, with the result that a strongly illustrative, narrative and even dilettantish aspect characterizes his early work." ("Gesien teen die agtergrond van sy kulturele andersoortigheid, het die kunstenaar hierdie Europese invloed dikwels materieel en formalisties benader, sodat daar 'n sterk illustratiewe, narratiewe en miskien selfs dilettantiese aspek in die vroeë werk oorbly") (1978: 88).

³⁰⁷ "...the non-academic and non-Western aspects of their work: an illogical and socially-determined spatial conception, a non-representational use of colour in a spontaneous and urgent manner and the experience of the social structure in terms of the artwork itself" ("...die a-akademiese en a-Westerse aspekte van hul werk: 'n illogiese en sosiaal-beleefde ruimtekonsepsie, 'n nie-representatiewe gebruik van kleur op 'n spontane en dringende wyse en 'n belewenis van die sosiale struktuur in terme van die kunswerk self") (1978: 89).

³⁰⁸ "Opsommenderwys word die vroeë bydraes tot kontemporere Bantoeekuns in Suid-Afrika dus gekenmerk deur 'n aanleer en selfs oppervlakkige nabootsing van die Westerse skilderkunstradisie ..." (1978: 89).

The 'two-worlds' paradigm, which posits an extreme polarisation between Western and African culture, relies on the trope of Africa to emphasise the fundamental irreconcilability of African and European sensibilities. Primarily, this entails a depiction of pre-colonial Africa as both the artist's lost paradise and the source of his continued collectivity. Battiss (1967: 20) articulates the crippling effects of tradition on the mind of the artist: "To the African craftsman the traditional way of thinking was a one-way course without change: arts and crafts remained the same over a long period: they were conventional." The traditional African cultural practitioner is a mere '*craftsman*' since the conventional rigidity of traditional society prevents the innovation and creative spontaneity that marks the true 'artist':

This timidity or conservatism is not difficult to understand, particularly in rural areas. Life there is still largely influenced by the overall tribal pattern of behaviour. And the overall pattern influences and can hamper even Africans who move to cities and grow up there (1967: 20).

The deeply encultured conventionalism of the black artist thus manifests in a propensity for imitation and formulaic repetition. The inability to conceive of an innovatory and original African artist, emerges very strongly in the following extraordinary statement by Winder: "Although his work follows the by now rather well-worn formula for African art both in style and subject matter, there are not the tell-tale signs of who he is slavishly imitating" (1967).

The modern black artist's 'two-worlds' heritage is not always represented in terms of loss and displacement - many authors stress that the 'in-betweenness' of the black artist provides him with opportunities to utilise the best that both worlds had to offer: "The Black artist often finds himself as part of two worlds, two traditions and two heritages. This gives him the opportunity to select the best from both, and to combine it into something unique" (De Jager 1992: 199). De Jager quotes the Negritudist philosopher and statesman, Leopold Senghor, to define this 'two-worlds' position (1992: 41):

...the neo-African...intends to contribute doubly to the Civilization of the Universal: to the civilization of the 20th century. Firstly by contributing the riches of his traditional philosophy, literature and art; and secondly by showing the borrowings he has made since the Renaissance from other civilizations, particularly the European.

Senghor, as one of the founders of the Negritudist movement, proposes a counter-essentialist celebration of a unique and inimitable Africanness as the African's 'gift' to the 'Civilization of

the Universal'. Although his intention was to foster awareness of the unique qualities of African culture while emphasising its adaptive and dynamic aspects, his views nonetheless reify the notion that marginal cultures can at best 'contribute' towards the 'universal' cultural centre dominated and defined by the West.³⁰⁹ De Jager's use of Negritudinism illustrates the dangers of counter-essentialism as strategy. It is inevitable that counter-essentialist views are almost instantaneously appropriated to endorse discriminatory essentialism. The result is a hall full of cultural mirrors that keep reflecting back the colonial stereotype.

The African willingness to 'contribute' to a 'universal culture' was soon interpreted as a brief and a duty hitherto neglected. The implication is that the African, as a pre-historical being, was isolated from international participation before contact with Europe:

It is essential that the Black people of South Africa begin to play their part and contribute their share to the international cultural pattern. The time has come for them to join in the symbiotic process of international stimulation and communication between all cultures, which needs their humanity, their instinctive sense of the pulsating forces of nature, their sense of humour (Scholz 1980: 145).

The notion that every culture has a special, unique 'tribute' to pay, provides an opportunity to prescribe what that contribution should be. Typically, Scholz regards the African's contribution as a physical (rather than cultural) one: *'their instinctive sense of the pulsating forces of nature'*.

This more 'positive' spin on the 'two-worlds' model allows for a generous interpretation of Western intervention in Africa, and presents an opportunity to ascribe the contemporary 'revival' of African culture to Western influence. The black artist is assumed to desire, more than anything else, to attain the cultural achievements of the West (which is conflated with the universal). An undated, anonymous newspaper clipping (*Presentation to hospital*) suggests that modern black artists' "... deep inner wish for this realisation to become universal is expressed in their whole attitude".

The 'two-worlds paradigm' leaves the black artist permanently suspended between two irreconcilable universes. His innate belonging to Africa keeps full-fledged modernity at bay, yet the authentic Africa of his ancestors is no longer accessible. This pernicious strategy ensures

³⁰⁹ According to the *South African Concise Oxford Dictionary* (2002: 251), the term 'contribute' derives from the Latin *contribuere*. The term 'tribute' is defined as "an act, statement, or gift that is intended to show gratitude, respect or admiration" (2002: 1253). It is derived from the Latin '*tributum*' which is in turn derived from '*tribus*', meaning tribe. The term *contribute* thus contains the implication of tribes paying respect (and taxes) to the empire.

the importance of white agency (the 'lost' African needs a guide in the urban jungle) and simultaneously serves to keep the modern black artist in his (marginal) place. Primarily, the 'two-worlds' syndrome is employed to endlessly defer the attainment of full modernity for the African. Snyman suggests that contemporary 'black art' remains a collective phenomenon and has thus not yet 'arrived' at full sophisticated maturity. He proposes that, in evaluating contemporary black art, one is dealing with a 'historically incomplete' process where the black artist is hovering somewhere between 'a typical African aesthetic consciousness' and 'a Western individualistic statement'.³¹⁰ In similar vein, Battiss (1967: 20) describes modern black art as being in an awkward state of transition. He announces that "... in the periods of transition artists produce many things that are awkward and rather ugly" and that only the best examples of contemporary African art "[do] not produce an uncomfortable duality between the new and the traditional". The successful modern black artist knows his (liminal) place by avoiding the extremes of imitation of European art on the one hand, and traditional conservatism on the other. Note the following judgemental evaluation of Ranko Pudi by Scholz's student, Tia Hugo (1980: 71):

It is clear that Pudi has not yet reached the *required* measure of synthesis between his traditional African heritage and western influences, which distinguish good contemporary Black art in South Africa. The problem he has not yet been able to solve and mirrored in his inconsistency of style, is that of identity – a problem common to many Blacks [italics mine].

The transformation from a collective primitive identity to an individual sophisticated modern identity is, however, continuously deferred by the 'Africa gene'. As illustrated in the subsection on 'Africa as trope', the key to the continued collectivity of black art lies in what De Jager called a '*common Black or African identity*':

Black artists is their traditions, customs and folklore [sic]. Because most artists adapt this source to their own views and experiences, much individual originality and variety is found in their interpretation, in which the element of mysticism in the use of traditional and tribal ritual and folklore is important (Basson1976b: 33).

³¹⁰ "Die vraag wat hiermee ontstaan, is of die Bantoe kunstenaar nog 'n tipiese estetiese bewussyn van Afrika getoon het, en of hy nader aan 'n Westerse individualistiese stelling gekom het, gesien teen die agtergrond van die feit dat hierdie tendens in die sewentigerjare verder uitgebou is. Omdat ons hier te doen het met 'n histories-onvoltooide proses, lyk dit tans moeilik om hierdie vraag finaal te beantwoord" (1978: 123).

The dialectic of individualism and collectivity is articulated by means of a rhetorical vacillation between opposing constructs – on the one hand ‘traditions’, ‘customs’, ‘folklore’, ‘mysticism’, ‘traditional’, ‘tribal ritual’; on the other ‘own views and experiences’ and ‘individual originality and variety’. The black artist, while displaying some of the individuality and innovation granted by the West, is continually drawn back into the collective unconscious of his tribal heritage.: “Matsoso retained a strong element of something quintessentially African in his urbanised lifestyle ...” (De Jager 1978: 119). Scholz insists that: “Artistic individuality or exclusiveness, as found among contemporary Black artists, is virtually unknown in tribal life. But contemporary Black artists have retained the element of collectiveness” (Scholz 1980: 13). Through this common African identity, the African urban sphere is rendered distinct from the ‘international’ urban sphere. It is this Africanness that irrevocably differentiates modern black art:

The myths and legends of Africa are an important source for the artist, and he is able to blend these with the reality of contemporary South African society. His work consequently not only syncretizes human and animal forms but also past and present, the old and the new Africa. Matsoso exhibits an urban awareness that brings his work a certain sophistication and has enabled him to transcend his personal situation to achieve an expression that is accessible to all (De Jager 1978-79).

The implication is that the contemporary urban black artist belongs fundamentally to the traditional world of Africa rather than the modern world (even though it is *‘universal and accessible to all’*) of the West. The black artist’s lack of belonging to the modern world (as symptomatically manifested in his alienation and anguish) is accompanied by an excess of belonging to the African world. The black artist’s individuation and accrual of a modern identity thus remains in constant tension with his quintessentially African inclination towards collectivity. Du Plessis (1983) states that “Individualism is not a characteristic of personality and self-perception in archaic Africa. The individual rather sees himself in terms of a family-collective, a tribal collective or a broader community which includes the deceased ancestors, with whom contact is maintained.” He insists that the contemporary African still relies on a similar “ontological self-perception and perception of the community”. He proposes that: “Indeed, the collective character of [the African’s] expression has shifted from the broadness of

the tribal-religious to the broadness of the socio-political".³¹¹ He therefore concludes that the modern urban black artists Shilakoe and Kumalo, for instance, have "direct contact with the African numinosum". Du Plessis (1983) significantly quotes Jung to support his analysis. The quote demonstrates an evolutionist perspective on individuation commonly held since the Enlightenment:

For a long time and for the great majority of mankind the symbol of a collective religion will suffice. It is perhaps only temporarily and for relatively few individuals that the existing collective religions have become inadequate. Wherever the cultural process is moving forward, whether in single individuals or in groups, we find a shaking off of collective beliefs. Every advance in culture is, psychologically, an extension of consciousness, a coming to consciousness that can take place only through discrimination. Therefore an advance always begins with individuation, that is to say with the individual, out of his isolation, cutting a new path through hitherto untrodden territory. To do this he must first return to the fundamental facts of his own being, irrespective of all authority and tradition, and to allow himself to become conscious of his distinctiveness. If he succeeds in giving collective validity to his widened consciousness, he creates a tension of opposites that provides the stimulation which culture needs for its further progress.

In this quintessentially modernist statement, a universal process of cultural evolution is proposed, in which collective cultures, through the agency of exceptional individuals who transcend the limitations of tradition, gradually make way for individualist cultures. Du Plessis (1983) puts this perspective into hermeneutic practice in his discussion of the artist Legae, who, to his mind, is one of those brave pioneers: "I'm talking about a collective consciousness or specifically collective qualities, but in truly important artists like Ezrom Legae, another mechanism comes into play. After an extremely promising start, he kept developing with great personal integrity, with work that transcends the merely collective".³¹²

³¹¹ "Indiividualisme is ook nie 'n kenmerk van die persoonlikheid en self-beskouing in argaïese Afrika nie. Die individu sien himself eerder in terme van die familie-kollektief, die stramkollektief of breër nog as deel van 'n gemeenskap wat die gestorwe voorvaders insluit, met wie kontak behou word. Dus het Shilokoe en Kumalo "direk kontak met die Afrika-numinosum". Die eietydse swartmens is dus steeds "...op ontologiese selfondersoek en beskouing van die samelewing toegewys. Inderdaad, die kollektiewe karakteristiek van die uiting het van die breë van die stamreligiëuse na die sosiaal-politieke verskuif".

³¹² "Ek praat van 'n kollektiewe bewussyn of dan kollektiewe kenmerke, maar by werklik belangrike kunstenaars soos Ezrom Legae, is 'n ander meganisme aan die werk. Hy het, na 'n uiters belowende begin, gedurig met groot persoonlike integriteit ontwikkel, met werk wat die bloot kollektiewe transendeer" (Du Plessis 1983).

The paradoxical conflation of universality and individuality (the 'universal' West as the locus of individuality) is inherent to art history and must be considered directly responsible for the endless description of the work of black artists as universal yet particular. A case in point is this description of Kumalo's work: "This work is of the essence of Africa, yet it has universal appeal" (Jacobs 1973). Or note Verstraete's description of a drawing by Dumile: "This terrifying drawing is a witness to the inhumanity and tragedy which are part and parcel of a specific existence, that of the urban black people in South Africa, but at the same time it transcends the particular and becomes an image of universal suffering" (Verstraete 1989: 162); or this passage from a newspaper clipping on Zondi: "His work is therefore endowed with a sensitive and simple yet deeply moving message expressed in universal and mature terms" ('Michael Zondi', 1975).

Yet the truly individual black artist remains a rare exception to the rule of collectivity. The paradox runs throughout writing on modern black art - although African tradition is presented as stifling and conventional, Africa (reproduced as trope of dark vitality and ignorant savagery) remains the primary source of the artist's creativity. Although Western modernity is presented as the only conduit towards full creative agency and individualism, it nonetheless presents, for the African, a sphere of unattainable and inauthentic sophistication - and a temptation to indulge an African propensity for mimesis.

As could be expected, the South African writer and African nationalist, Herbert Dhlomo, provides a contrary perspective on the 'two-worlds' phenomenon. In this passage the 'split personality' of the modern black subject emerges as a survival strategy. Significantly, the city is here represented as locus of repression while the rural traditional sphere is represented as the site of individuation, freedom and dignity:

Obliged to live as a begging worker in the city and a comparatively free kraal-head in his rural home, the tribal African has a Jekyll-and-Hyde existence. At work he is 'docile', and 'foolish'- 'a child'; he laughs, obeys, is non-committal; salutes his master as 'Baas' and 'Nkosi'; in short, is a typical example of the 'unspoiled nigger' so loved, and whose decimation is so regretted, in certain quarters. In his tribal home he is a dignified country squire. There he composes his poems and songs, maintains his tribal traditions and love' (quoted in Sack 1989).

Dhlomo's insightful sketch of the double consciousness of the early modern black man provides an insider perspective that shifts the 'two-worlds' theory from a dialectic of irreconcilable

essences to a consideration of subaltern black subjectivity as the performance of a very fraught and delicate balancing act.³¹³ The African artist Christopher Okigbo said, in an interview with Duerden (1968: 24):

I think all we hear nowadays of men-of-two-world is a lot of nonsense. I belong, integrally, to my own society, just as, I believe, I belong integrally to other societies than my own. The truth is that modern Africa is no longer a product of an entirely indigenous culture. The modern sensibility, which the modern African poet is trying to express, is by its very nature complex; it has complex values, some of which are indigenous, some exotic, some traditional, some modern. Some of these values are Christian, some non-Christian, and I think that anybody who thinks it is possible to express consistently only one line of values, indigenous or exotic, is probably being artificial.

4.2.5.2 *The city as locus of a modern identity*

Similar to Verstraete, Snyman allegorises the city as site of dispossession and alienation. He quotes Segy in this regard:

[There is] something tragic in the African's loss of contact with his past. The new African generation lives more and more in cities where they are influenced by the white man's institutions. They use and prefer manufactured products. They turn against their own traditions and institutions. They repudiate their cultural heritage without realising their loss (1978: 66-67).

By contrast, however, De Jager portrays the city as a means of realising the modern black artist's desire 'to become universal':

The art of the Black man in South Africa is ... an art of the city and is fully rooted in modern and contemporary life and society. As such it has of necessity also acquired sophisticated notions and this is why his urban experiences are not always given back to us in a simple one-to-one relation (1992: 206).

It is made abundantly clear that the city is the locus of *'modern and contemporary life and society'*. The urban sphere *'of necessity'* introduces a measure of sophistication which prevents modern black art from *'always'* depicting experiences *'in a simple one-to-one relation'*. The city is thus the source of (some) black artists' new-found creative sophistication and complexity.

³¹³ In this sense, Dhlomo's perspective has something in common with the black American anthropologist Du Bois' (c1969) concept of a split between the black American's 'American' and 'Negro' selves.

The city is not only the source of the artist's creativity, but the source of his very identity – it is nothing less than the magical vehicle that transforms the collective African into a modern subject: “Developing at the same time as urban awareness and largely because of it, was an awareness of his identity on the part of the Black man in South Africa” (De Jager 1992: 40). Emerging out of the anonymity of his unconscious and collective rural past into the individuation of a conscious urban present, the artist's newfound sense of identity inculcates an awareness of both his universal human nature and his innate African nature: “The awareness of identity resulted in a consciousness of the self, and of the artist's realization of his own potential; that he, in his own right, had something valuable to say and to contribute to universal culture”. This awareness of his own subjectivity – this emerging into consciousness and history - must also entail an awareness of his particular and ineluctable African self: “To most of them it means awareness of the self, of an own identity; on the one hand the discovery of the richness of an indigenous heritage and on the other an awareness of the meaning and values of contemporary life” (De Jager 1987: 209-210).

In *Images of Man*, De Jager (with breathtaking insensitivity) elaborates on Battiss' conviction that European culture constitutes a liberating force (1992: 3): “Under the new conditions brought about by contact with European culture the gifted Black artist is freed from the tribal chores and duties that bound him under the old system.” He continues that “The artist is freed from the rules and norms that defined creativity under traditional circumstances and the group-oriented thought processes of his society”. Modernity offers the black artist the gift of autonomous subjectivity:

The art of the contemporary Black artist has thus become individualized. It is no longer anonymous as merely belonging to this or that tribe. In sociological terms his status is now achieved and is no longer ascribed. In addition he is no longer a passive participant but a critical participant who can also make a personal contribution. ... The contemporary Black artist can become a critic of even his own society (1992: 3).³¹⁴

The criteria of the West are represented as '*objective*' and '*universal*' yardsticks which enable the Western critic to recognise and evaluate the '*intrinsic*' qualities of the artist's work: “The merits of his art are now determined by the personal and intrinsic qualities of his work and it is judged by more objective and universal aesthetic criteria” (De Jager 1992: 3). Ricouer

³¹⁴ The perception of Western culture (which, in the South African context, refers to the colonial and apartheid regimes) as 'liberating' the 'Black man' from the tyranny of his own culture indicates a willful blindness that is particularly repugnant if one ponders the repressive measures enforced by these successive regimes.

suggests that “The fact that universal civilization has for a long time originated from the European centre has maintained the illusion that European culture was, in fact and by right, a universal culture” (Ricoeur 1965: 277). The black artist, through the facilitation of the European, is thus invited to transcend the narrow confines of tradition and to join a universal brotherhood of man. A modern urban existence affords the artist the sophisticated consciousness and self-awareness to recognise and acknowledge his own African heritage, and also offers him a gateway out of the prison of this heritage:

Add to this also a sophistication derived from urban awareness. It is this sophistication that has enabled the contemporary South African Black artist to break through the narrow confines and barriers of traditional tribal life and values and the narrow limits of his own life and society. It enables him to partake in and to interact fully with modern urban society (De Jager 1992: 207).

Despite numerous declarations about the putative individuation of the black artist, it is nonetheless made very clear that his innate nature inclines him towards collectivity and mimesis. De Jager’s (1992: 199) reassurance that: “What has emerged from this experience [of ‘two worlds’] has clearly showed that Black artists are inventors and innovators, not imitators” is a highly ambiguous attempt to deflect the common belief in the African’s propensity for mimicry. De Jager’s protestations are suspect, since the very need to protest the black artist’s innovatory abilities indicates the inclination to believe the opposite. Verstraete makes a similarly revealing statement when she suggests that: “The dangers of indiscriminate ‘borrowing’ from the white cultural heritage were held in check by this desire [bred by Black Consciousness] for autonomy and a reassertion of African identity” (1989: 171).

In another text, De Jager again protests the Black artist’s ability to innovate, but the ambiguities surrounding this ‘conviction’ are accentuated:

The above existential considerations [an overgeneralised description of urban ‘black existence’] explain why South African Black artists have not remained static in art and philosophy, why they have not become imitation European philosophers and artists. It also explains why they have been able to move away from, and out of the confined isolation of traditional society, creating in full participation and interaction with the contemporary world. The circumstances outlined above are historically true. To deny South African Black artists these existential realities, some of which are essential aspects of their innate being, others part of their daily life

and acculturative experience, is to deny them artistic existence and autonomy as creative beings³¹⁵ (1992: 4).

There is much to unpack in this resonant passage. Modern black artists have 'not *remained* static' (indicating the stasis of the African tradition they emerged from) – nor, however, have they become *imitation* Europeans (since, presumably, they have uniquely African existential experiences). The modern urban sphere has '*enabled*' the black artist to break out of the '*confined isolation*' of tradition into '*full participation*' with the '*contemporary world*'. The contemporary world is the modern internationalism of the West. In accordance with Hegel's perception of colonial intervention as the means by which the immature Other is introduced into history and hence (eventual) maturity, the Western city becomes a means to attain agency and artistic individuation. As is customary in modernist discourse, the binary pair of 'tradition' and 'modernity' is here supported by a web of radically unequal related dualisms: confined isolation/contemporary world; rural/urban; past/present; timeless/historical; innate/experience; custom/creativity; dependence/autonomy; simplicity/sophistication. The urban sphere is a characteristically modern sphere, and hence a gateway to creative freedom and membership of '*the contemporary world*'. The particular '*existential realities*' of modern black artists are partly '*essential aspects of their innate being*' (their inherent Africanness) and partly '*their daily life and acculturative experience*' (the modernity inflicted on them by circumstance). Africanness is '*innate*' (and hence insurmountable and eternal) whereas the Western influence amounts to '*acculturative experience*' – it is a temporal phenomenon. The passage is finally capped with a statement of supreme irony - to deny modern African artists this 'two-worlds' existential reality (an essential Africanness combined with inflicted acculturation) is to deny them '*artistic existence and autonomy as creative beings*'.

Despite the promise of individuation held out by the 'universal city', De Jager makes it very clear that the particular African urban sphere - while providing the means towards sophistication - is also a collective sphere that effectively precludes full individuation. By

³¹⁵ See virtually the exact sentiment expressed in an earlier publication by De Jager. This serves as one example of how reiterative and repetitive De Jager's writings tend to be: "They have not become imitation European philosophers and artists, and have indeed been able to move away from, and out of, the confined isolation of traditional society, creating in full participation and interaction with the contemporary world. These factors are historically true, and to deny our African artists these existential realities – some of which are essential aspects of their innate being, others part of their acculturative experience – is to deny them artistic existence and autonomy as free human beings" (1987: 210).

characteristically overarticulating the opposite, De Jager manages to suggest that the fully individuated urban black artist is a rare exception:³¹⁶

The above [a statement on shared socio-economic conditions] does not mean that every Black artist conforms exactly in all respects and that their art represent a dreary, uniform and stereotyped artistic image. Each artist, and in any community, reacts in his own individual way to the same or similar stimuli. There are South African Black artists who have, to a varying degree, evolved an independent personal and artistic style, even within their common social and cultural circumstances. Nevertheless, there are a few of these artists who can claim that they have not been affected or influenced by the shared experiences and feelings of their people and whose art is not in some way rooted in and derived from their common urban Black or African identity (1992: 4).

The ambiguities surrounding the city are indicative of the ambiguities inherent to the authorial construction of the modern black artist. The city is allegorised as sign of both the loss of authentic (African) identity and attainment of true individual subjectivity. It is simultaneously a universal modern institution that grants modernity as a gift; yet the African city (the township) has a very particular character that sustains the collective Africanness of the Black Man.

4.2.5.3 *Primitivism and the nature of the modern black artist*

These paradoxes are amplified when the art of modern black primitivists is interpreted. As discussed in Chapter 3, Modernist theorists such as Fry regarded European Modernist primitivism as the sophisticated end-result of centuries of evolutionary development. The European primitivist's pursuit of 'the primitive' is the culmination of modernity's artifice – it is the ultimate in a sophisticated search for lost origins and authenticity. It is therefore of a fundamentally different order to the artistic products of the 'true primitive'. As 'a true primitive', the African represents the origin that the primitivist is attempting to retrieve. How then should the Modernist primitivism of the modern black artist be interpreted?

Verstraete significantly compares Dumile with the French primitivist artist Gauguin, and proposes that the two artists' positions are 'reversed' – that is, Gauguin fled the city to find the

³¹⁶ See also this ambivalent statement: "A number of its exponents derive from the individual, rather than the group" (De Jager 1987: 212).

'primitive', while Dumile was wrenched from 'the primitive' only to find himself lost in the modern city:³¹⁷

It is significant that Dumile, in a reverse situation, finding himself alienated, confused and anxious in an urban society which was totally foreign to him, asked the same questions in a text that reads like a cry of anguish: Who am I? Where do I come from? What am I doing in this world? His art is an attempt to find an answer: it is a quest for identity as man and artist and articulates the voices of all his people (1989: 159).

By suggesting that Dumile finds himself in the exact obverse position to Gauguin, Verstraete makes it amply clear that Gauguin's journey was a quintessentially Modernist quest 'back in time' from his sophisticated urban present to the originary 'primitive' origins of mankind, while Dumile's artistic quest constitutes a journey forward – from his primitive origins into the inevitability of modernity.

An early article on Ernest Mancoba³¹⁸ exemplifies the rich opportunities for paradox and confusion afforded by a black artist who practised a Modernist primitivist style:

There is a Bantu sculptor on the Reef who has ceased to imitate the European style of sculpture. He has discovered the Negro art of Africa, and is already applying it to some of his own work with enthusiasm ('Primitive Art of Africa: Bantu Sculptor's Studies', 1936).

The notion that the 'Bantu sculptor' *ceased* to imitate the European style (upon his discovery of the 'Negro art of Africa') implies, of course, that his art, prior to this (re)discovery of his African roots, constituted mere *imitation* of European culture (ie, not mastery but mimicry). A black artist who works in a 'European' style and method can be regarded as neither original nor authentic, hence the 'Bantu sculptor' reverts to an African idiom 'with enthusiasm'. The significant phrase '*ceased to imitate*' indicates that Mancoba's adoption of traditional African practices is not a Modernist search for origins, but simply a reversion to type. There is an irony to this. Given the constraints upon the black artist in the 1930s, when Mancoba started experimenting with a primitivist style and methods, it is very unlikely that the artist 'discovered' African art by

³¹⁷ A similar view is expressed in an anonymous newspaper review on Sekoto which proposed: "One art critic has reminded Sekoto that the great Gauguin had forsaken Paris to seek in primitive Tahiti what Paris did not have. Would Sekoto, whose position was the exact opposite, succeed in his quest? There were others who took the view that Sekoto would lose his African identity in Paris" (Bantu artist in Paris, 1949).

³¹⁸ Mancoba left South Africa to settle in Copenhagen and became a member of the Cobra art group, which was founded in 1948 and lasted under that name until 1951.

frequenting ethnology museums or visiting the handful of private galleries and outlets that sold such art - much less that he 'discovered' this art by exploring his own particular cultural heritage. Rather it is likely that the well-read Mancoba, who was a missionary-trained teacher and a member of the small but elite black petit bourgeoisie, would have informed himself about the latest art trends in Europe and would thus have become acquainted with 'Negro art' via the avant-garde primitivism of the Cubists and the Expressionists. Given the progressivist aspirations of the 'new African' of the early 20th century, this roundabout route to a discovery of 'traditional' African art seems very likely. The modern African artist's primitivism is thus one step further removed from 'source' than the European Modernist's primitivism, yet is predictably interpreted as an 'authentic primitiveness'.

Thus the deliberate modernist primitivism of artists such as Mancoba and Kumalo is interpreted as a sign of their innate primitive nature rather than an instance of Modernist primitivism. Snyman takes Dubow and Berman to task for interpreting Gladys Ngudlandlu's work as primitivist. He suggests that this designation implies a similarity between her work and European 'primitives' such as Henri Rousseau and Grandma Moses and insists that, rather, her work must be interpreted as the extension of African art traditions. She is, by implication, a true primitive rather than a primitivist (Snyman 1978: 93). Likewise, Cheales (1975) describes Kumalo's art as "an eerie one of naiveté, forthright modelling and a strong dash of the primitive". Although the sculptor is a celebrated artist in the prime of his life, his innate primitivity endlessly defers the full maturity of a modern subjectivity: "You feel the 40-year old sculptor (one of our most distinguished artists) being drawn backwards into the mists of superstition and tribal memories." There is in his work an "undercurrent of savage simplicity" and although he "strains for more sophistication, such work would be highly impressive if you did not see the pieces of more emotional intensity". This '*emotional intensity*' exposes the artist's work as 'authentically primitive' rather than primitivist. Attempts to master contemporary modernism (the artist '*strains for more sophistication*') are dismissed as insincere: "Fortunately, Kumalo ... only fleetingly lingers on the use of contemporary ideas in his sculpture. But, always, it is the more primitive mood that shows him at his greatest" (Cheales 1975).³¹⁹

The terms '*primitive*'; '*raw*'; '*strong*'; '*brutally*'; '*intensity*'; '*drawn backwards*'; '*mists of superstition*'; '*tribal memories*'; '*undercurrent of savage simplicity*' are all terms that reproduce a

³¹⁹ The same author says of Cyprian Shilakoe's work that his "primitive, raw vision is at full flood" and that "What you sense in this show is the artist's strong primitive vision which comes through very clearly, even brutally..." (Cheales 1971a).

colonial stereotype of African identity that utterly precludes a modern subjectivity. While few writings so openly reproduce this colonial stereotype, the relentless emphasis on emotional signifiers in descriptions of modern urban art underscores this classic depiction of the African as irrational rather than an autonomous subject in command of reason. In one relatively short text on Dumile, the list of expressions and adjectives used by De Jager indicates this hyperbolic overdetermination of the emotional and the irrational: *“exceptional, spontaneous and inherent talent”; “powerful and original”; “express his deep emotional feelings”; “distortion stemming from tremendous emotion”; “great vitality, freedom from the limitations of reason”; “the absence of any aesthetic pre-occupations”; “executed spontaneously, according to the artist’s subconscious thoughts and vision;” “utterance to emotions and feelings”; “these figures express their inner and spiritual experiences”; “distorted style; heightening the sensations of the emotions”; “reflecting his feelings and emotions”; “one of the most expressive pieces”; “the spontaneity and the passion and conviction with which it was executed is overwhelming”; “dominating human figures are apocalyptic in appearance”; “the distortion and contortion of these figures, strongly dehumanized, heighten the sense of agony and horror”; “these figures ride into the modern contemporary scene, the world in which we live, screaming their message of warning and doom. Everything about them, their twisted and grotesque bodies and limbs, demagogic eyes and contorted mouths, all proclaim their single propose (sic), to protest in terms of horror, suffering and agony”; “bleak, neurotic environment”; “archetypal symbols, arising spontaneously from Dumile’s subconscious”; “subconscious yearning for the past”; “a dimension of existence which has been lost forever”; “spontaneous technique”; “moulded by hand with great emotion and vitality”; “characterised by distortion of form”; “tremendous emotion and feeling”; “compelling quality”; “he communicated his emotions and feelings”; “moments of intense emotion”; “passion and conviction”; a spontaneous vitality”; “his subconscious mind” (1992: 56-65).³²⁰*

Snyman refers to Maquet’s theory that the African has a propensity for action rather than contemplation (1978: 56). This emphasis on the physical, the involuntary and the unconscious

³²⁰ See also: “These animal figures [of Dumile] seem to appear as archetypal symbols, arising spontaneously from the subconscious” (De Jager 1972); and “His art, which reveals certain morbid undercurrents, is characterised by a distortion stemming from tremendous emotion. To a great extent this work belongs to the art of the fantastic. The tremendous vitality of this work, which is very contemporary, appears to be drawn from the artist’s subconscious; a large number of these drawings therefore contain strong elements of the subconscious. The drawings are marked by their freedom from the limitation of reason and absence of any aesthetic preoccupation. The viewer gets the impression that they were executed spontaneously in accordance with the artist’s subconscious thought and vision” (De Jager 1975d). These passages also serve to demonstrate the hypnotically reiterative nature of De Jager’s writing. Terms used by Verstraete echo those used by De Jager: ‘unselfconscious’, ‘intuitive’, ‘innate’, ‘emotional’, and she quotes De Jager on Dumile: “the metaphysical expression of the unconscious” and “freedom from the limitations of reason and the absence of any aesthetic preoccupation” (Verstraete 1989: 166).

precludes an interpretation of contemporary black artists as 20th-century Modernists, fully and consciously in command of a sophisticated and deliberate artistic vocabulary. The evocation of an involuntary and unconscious African creative urge echoes Fry's assertion that European Modernism was the result of a long and complex evolutionary development, whereas African formal abstraction was, conversely, innate and primitive. For Cheales (1970a), the contemporary black artist's efforts are thus of a particularly atavistic order: "In contrast with the very modern atmosphere of Kevin Atkinson's paintings and Richard Wake's metal sculpture, Dumile's sharp, spiky pen and ink drawings could be of beings from a totally different planet." In a rather extraordinary statement by Battiss, the author's expectations regarding 'appropriate' subject matter for the black artist are revealed:

It is not that the new African artists lack imagination or fantasy: on the contrary, many of them are highly imaginative. But they seem to be sure that whatever they wish to express – the subconscious, the erotic, surrealist dreams, myths and memories of their racial past – must be said fairly directly (1967: 21).

The desire simultaneously to acknowledge the modern black artist as a unique individual (which, as I have discussed, is an art historical imperative) and as quintessentially African (and thus a collective Other), emerges as a particularly virulent ambiguity:

The painting is a watercolour which shows the delicacy of touch and wealth of detail so typical of the artist's [Mogano's] work. It is a fine example of his unique style - a highly refined technique combined with a primitive view and interpretation of his subject matter. His good humour is also evident and lends to the painting a magic of its own not dependent on the witchcraft innate in the subject (David 1974).

The colonial binaries of an irrational and instinctive African creativity versus the rational and deliberate creation of European culture are redeployed to reclaim cultural Modernism as a singularly 'white' activity; while the modern black artist's artistic efforts harken back to age-old African cultural rituals:

Sithole's subjects, man and wild creatures, are rendered in a semi-abstract style. These sculptures are strongly indigenous in form and concept, embracing both traditional and acculturated Africa. There is a 'spiritual sensualism' in his pieces, which has always been an essential part of African ceremony, and collectively these figurative sculptures constitute a visual vocabulary of qualities and modes inherent in indigenous ritual (De Jager 1977/78).

An anonymous article on Stanley Nkosi presents another example:

Humans and animals with limbs exaggerated out of all proportions convey strong emotion in tortuous poses. Grotesque hands are wrung despairingly, supple bodies writhe in the ecstasy of dances; arms clasp affectionately; all evidence of an exuberant life-force ('Stanley Nkosi', 1972).

An anonymous newspaper review on Dumile (significantly titled 'Untutored, this African depicts the elemental' (1966)) is particularly revealing of the sexual nature of 'the modern primitive': "The fecundity of the female, the accents on buttocks, breasts and thighs, are all part of his awakening to the animal nature of things." Thus the sensual, physical and sexual awareness of the artist points at a spontaneous (African) sympathy with (and sexual appreciation of) 'the animal nature' of the black woman.³²¹

The emotional content of the art of particularly expressive artists such as Dumile Feni and Cyprian Shilakoe is variously ascribed to an innate African emotionalism (De Jager and Snyman); to the loss and alienation wrought by acculturation (Verstraete); or as a propensity towards bathetic exaggeration and artistic pretension. Cheales (1970b), for instance, dismisses the stark despair of Shilakoe's work as the over-dramatisation of a 'fashionable' existential unhappiness that contradicts the 'truth' that all blacks are fundamentally happy and simple souls. The implication is that this expressiveness is a mere pretence at artistic depth and seriousness:

These beings are horrifying prisoners in Shilakoe's own mind, causing one to give them instantaneously greater consideration and sympathy than is perhaps warranted if one thinks of a vast continent of people who certainly are not enslaved and kept in spiritual limbo ... The artist is interpreting his times with such emotional intensity that he makes it seem that all his people, in his age, live in a state of stark, eternal doom ... Unfortunately, however difficult the times, these damned beings seem too much like wraiths of Hades to knit in with the truth of people who are, in the main, often happier in their simplicity that (sic) the world actually allows.

³²¹ Sometimes the ambiguities generated by the conflicting enlightenment subjectivity of the artist and the innate primitivity of the African lead to incoherent gobbledygook, as exemplified by this statement by Cheales (1971b) on Winston Saoli: "The culmination of this near-naive style is a tangy sophisticated simplicity, occasionally brushed by a semblance of the primitive."

Oguibe notes that a double standard pertains to the European's assimilation of African culture, versus the African's assimilation of European culture:

The assimilation of Outsider culture into European art is considered the most significant revolution of its time while the same is bemoaned in Africa as a sign of the disintegration and corrosion of the native by civilization. Or, on the other hand, Africans are to be patted on the head for making a 'successful transition' into modernity (1999: 326).

He proposes that the ambiguous reception of African Modernism flows from a reluctance to relinquish the trope of an exotic Africa: "To reject the exoticism of Africa is to destroy an entire world-view, carefully and painstakingly fabricated over several centuries (1999: 326).

Given the myriad colonialist assumptions that framed the reception of modern black art, it is perhaps not surprising that African primitivism was instantly interpreted as sign of an ineluctably primitive nature. The need exists, therefore, for a more nuanced investigation of Modernist Primitivism in South Africa. It stands to reason that primitivism must resonate in subtly different ways for modern African artists – as such it is, potentially, a very rich topic to investigate. Primitivism comes pre-encoded with dense layers of signs – many of them conflicting. Primitivism represents, above all, the artist's Romantic search for pre-modern wholeness. Urban black artists' primitivism could thus, on one level, quite simply be interpreted as the result of a typical 20th-century disenchantment with modernity and urban existence. However, the disillusionment and sense of displacement that characterises the primitivist quest is, in the case of the modern black artist, doubly amplified since it also articulates the forcible and continuing destruction of his African heritage and political autonomy. Primitivism, for the African artist, thus presents opportunities for the airing of a counter-colonial African voice. In this sense, it could be interpreted as an African nationalist construction of an independent and characteristically African modernity. In addition, it must be kept in mind that, in the first half of the 20th-century, primitivism signified the vanguard of European cultural sophistication. For a black artist keen on using his art to demonstrate his contemporaneity and modernity, primitivism signified precisely such a sophisticated attainment.

4.2.5.4 *Identity and ethnicity*

As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1995: 213) remark, ethnicity “intersects with notions of race, marginality, Imperialism, and identity”. It has frequently been pointed out that ethnicity was manipulated and elaborately constructed to enforce difference as part of the apartheid strategy of divide and rule. I propose that this system elaborated and institutionalised an existing modernist/colonialist classificatory system of differences. I investigate the degree to which particular black artists are objectified as specimens of specific ethnic identities in the literatures concerned.

As the above discussion clearly shows, several contradictory discourses conspire to construct for the artist an identity that is at once particular and universal, infantile and mature, and in perpetual vacillation between the individual and the collective. When ethnicity is added to this cocktail, the ambiguities are compounded. Said (2000: 179) proposes that

the invention of [ethnic] tradition was a practice very much used by authorities as an instrument of rule in mass societies when the bonds of small social units like village and family were dissolving and authorities needed to find other ways of connecting a large number of people to each other.

Vail (1989: 3) discusses how the fostering of tribalism in South Africa not only served “to promote political divisions among the country’s African population”, but also aided in the production of all black South Africans as ‘tribal’ Africans rather than national citizens. The apartheid state utilised (and to a large extent aided in the construction of) ethnicity to justify and implement a policy of divide and rule. In this regard, the anthropological notion of the cultural monad played a crucial role. The fiction of authentic, self-same and unique cultural units legitimated not only the policy of separate development, but also justified Afrikaner separatism and protectionism. It is therefore not surprising that the cultural anthropological conception of the ethnic unit as the central determinant of identity should have contributed significantly towards discourse on modern black art.

Earlier accounts of modern black art were more inclined to focus on the ethnic identity of the artist than subsequent texts. Titles of newspaper reviews often tended to foreground the tribal affiliation of the artist rather than his personal identity: *‘Noted Zulu Artist is Sage’* (1947); *‘Zulu Life on 500 sq. ft. Pictures’* (1937); *‘Zulu Artist to Hold Exhibition’*, (1952); *‘Xhosa is a New Name in Art’*, (1966); *‘Zulu Painter’s Vision’* (1942). This ethnic focus continued the anthropological practice of interpreting African art objects as ethnographic specimens of their

particular cultural/ethnic monad. Rankin (1993) notes that the clay figures of Samuel Makonyana were displayed in the National Cultural History Museum of Pretoria in the 1930s under the anonymous label 'Southern Sotho'. Just like 'the Fang mask' or 'the Yoruba sculpture', the modern art object was displayed as signifier of the character of the ethnic enclave, and the artist was regarded as incidental conduit of this ethnic identity.

It is notable that the ethnic identity most frequently highlighted is Zulu. Other ethnic affiliations are seldom mentioned – and even more rarely used to interpret the output of individual black artists. The tendency in early newspaper reviews of modern black artists of non-Zulu ethnic background was to foreground their racial rather than ethnic identity by referring to them as 'natives' or 'bantus': *'Bantu Art's New Phase'* (1936); *'Primitive art of Africa: Bantu sculptor's studies'* (1936); *'Native Artist to Exhibit'* (1959); *'A Native Youth Carved This'* (1950). Reasons why Zulu ethnicity - in particular - should have been highlighted can only be speculated upon. Most likely 'Zulu identity' featured more prominently in the white public imaginary than other ethnicities through the heritage of British colonialism, which widely disseminated a romanticised and particularly unitary view of 'the Zulu'. Leeb-du Toit suggests that subsequently, the construction of a coherent Zulu identity has served a variety of dubious political purposes throughout modern South African history:

From early this century, a controversial Zulu ethnic identity has been forged in KwaZulu-Natal. Anthropologists, segregationists, African nationalists and the like have identified and ambiguously harnessed facets of this seemingly coherent identity in their advancement of various political, economic and cultural interests in the region (1997: 16).

Perhaps white public ignorance about, for instance, 'Pedi' or 'Tsonga' cultural practices and history would have rendered mention of such artists' ethnic background meaningless and irrelevant (to the targeted white reader). This suggests that the term 'Zulu', which carries resonance as a trope (the trope of the proud traditional African warrior), served as a marker of the inherent ethnicity of all modern black art. This could also be due to the existence of the early Inkatha movement, which created a very public and vociferous Zulu ethnic identity for political purposes in the early 20th century.³²²

It is not unlikely that ethnicity provided an instant and convenient taxonomic space through

³²² Inkatha was a cultural organisation created by King Solomon in the 1920s to revive Zulu pride in heritage as a counter to white cultural imperialism. The movement was revived by Mangosotho Buthelezi in 1975 as the Inkatha National Cultural Liberation Movement.

which to situate modern black artists that could not be accommodated in an exclusively white national artistic canon. This is particularly noticeable in writings about the pioneers, Sekoto, Pemba, Bhengu and Mohl, all of whom (with the exception of Bhengu), ironically chose to eschew ethnic representations. In fact, as progressive and modernist 'new Africans' (to use Dhlomo's designation), they largely focused on representations of modern African identity using distinctly Western naturalistic conventions. Yet writing (contemporary and later) about these artists tend to highlight their ethnicity. In *'Images of Man'*, for instance, De Jager mentions Sekoto, Pemba and Bhengu's ethnic affiliation – each time in the first sentence of the sections devoted to them, while the ethnic background of later artists (Polly Street artists in particular) is referred to very rarely. This could be because he drew on earlier literatures about these artists, in which, as was customary, attention was drawn to artists' ethnic origins.

The fact that ethnicity (selectively) fell away as central determinant of identity in later writings, could be because modern black art was treated as a more collective (black) phenomenon in texts of the '70s and '80s. However, the earlier tendency to highlight particularly the ethnic affiliation of the Zulu artist continues. As Rosen has pointed out, the oeuvre of the 'Zulu artist' Azaria Mbatha, is consistently interpreted as ethnic-specific, and thus, she concludes, "art history has been complicit in constructing ethnicity and, in this way, has perpetuated racist and essentialist myths about exotic, black, rural tribalism" (1993: 9). Rosen demonstrates how virtually all the authors who wrote about Mbatha (De Jager, Berman, Scholz, Snyman) interpreted his art as 'authentically Zulu' by tracing dubious parallels between 'traditional' Zulu art and Mbatha's graphic works. The perpetuation of the binary pairs urban/rural, ethnic/universal, art/craft, all come into play in the representation of Mbatha as both alienated modern artist and representative of an authentic Zulu idiom. The following newspaper review of Mbatha's art serves as an example of this foregrounding of ethnicity: "Azaria Mbatha's linocuts ... reveal a fusion of traditional Zulu pictorial conventions (as can be seen in the wood friezes of the Zulu tribes) and Medieval design elements. This fusion is quite logical if one remembers that Mbatha is a Zulu, strongly ware of his racial ties ..." ('South African Graphic Art', undated).

The following newspaper article about Jabulani and Ntuli describes the ethnic focus of their art: "... Jabulani is a Zulu through and through ... He exclusively draws pictures of traditional Zulu life – subjects he either knows personally, or scenes which his grandfather ... described to him in a vivid way" ('The Brothers', 1967). This strong ethnographic focus is, however, suspect as 'an authentic Zulu vision', since records show that ethnic representations were often

encouraged by white patrons as suitable subject matter for black artists. From an evolutionist viewpoint, scenes of 'traditional ethnic' culture were regarded as valuable documentation since they recorded cultural practices that were assumed to be soon extinct. Dr Killie Campbell, for instance, commissioned illustrations of Zulu customs from Bhengu for her private collection of Africana (now the Campbell collection at the University of Natal), and pronounced that "I find people are far more interested in your historical work of customs than the ordinary ones" (in Miles 1997: 32). Rankin notes that these images were not displayed as works of art, but as ethnographic records (1993: 7). Another indication of how white expectations might have shaped ethnic content in modern black art, was the establishment of the Gundelfinger prize in 1928, which was awarded annually for "the best painting of native life". Bhengu was also encouraged by the ethnologist Max Kohler to produce records of Zulu customs and, as Miles recounts: "Damant encouraged Makonyane to depict his own people at their daily tasks instead of images of the missionaries. Consequently a rich gallery of women being initiated, making beds, winnowing, hoeing, carrying water, grinding maize, breast-feeding or on the way to work evolved" (1997: 35).

The following passage reveals how effectively ethnicity is employed as Otherising strategy in literature on modern black art: "His work, without losing its essential African-ness has a universality. The stylised children's faces, absorbed or apprehensive, have an appeal that is human, not merely ethnic" (Coulson: 1977). The passage highlights not only how the 'ethnic' functions as marker of an essential Africanness that articulates something distinct to the universal 'human'; the radical inequality of the universal/particular dialectic is also exposed by the adjective '*merely* ethnic'. The 'strong ethnic ties' of the Bantu artist were regarded as a heritage which served as source of an authenticity and difference: "While the Bantu artists in South Africa, drawing on their strong artistic and cultural heritage, have more or less followed their own direction, we find that the coloured artists tend to align themselves naturally with the whites in the field of artistic production" (*South African Graphic Art*, undated). The overdetermination of black ethnicity arguably served the purpose of rendering the African unassimilable by the modern nation state. Part of this strategy was also to stress that the modern nation state posed a threat to ethnic survival. A collective national South African identity was seen as the downfall of the particularity and difference of ethnic identities. When Jill Addleson opened the exhibition 'Developments in Zulu Rural and Urban Crafts' at the South African National Gallery in 1987, she said:

[T]here are two major trends recognisable in our art: one type which is essentially

western in tradition; the other which is basically indigenous in character. As barriers between the two major groups of people are broken down, there is a concomitant merging of characteristics distinctive of each... But the questions we must ask are the following: will such equality give rise to a national style in art? Or will the new South Africa be able to preserve a Zulu vision in art? (1987: 15).

Addleson's statement is ambiguous and muddled, but consistent in so far as it renders the modernity of the West and the ethnicity of the Zulu as mutually exclusive. The use of the term 'Or' makes it clear that a choice is indicated - either a national (and 'equal') culture must be forged, or an authentic '*Zulu vision*' must be preserved. Implicitly, there is no way in which the binary modalities of modernity and tradition can '*merge*' into a '*national style in art*' without in the process sacrificing an authentic and unique ethnicity. Addleson mistakes sameness (the triumph of an appropriative Western identity) for '*equality*', and can clearly only imagine a unitary Western national culture, rather than one ontologically characterised by multiplicity and variety. The concern with ethnicity thus formed part of a discourse of 'salvation' and 'authenticity', which was motivated by the fear that 'traditional' African cultures were being obliterated by modernity. While there was, clearly, some foundation to these fears (fears that are still today articulated as a battle between the local and the global), this discourse of salvation and authenticity did much to further a conception of modernity and ethnic tradition as fundamentally inimical to one another. Ethnicity was conceived of as a static, unitary phenomenon, whereas, like all subjective modalities, it could more fruitfully have been interpreted as a substantively discursive, dynamic and penetrable construct.

4.2.6 White teachers, markets, brokers and patrons

While modern black art practice is generally interpreted as an 'authentic' African/ethnic phenomenon that shows discernable links with traditional art practices and shares in a quintessentially African 'soul', writers on the topic nonetheless leave the reader in no doubt that white patronage, commercial support and teaching played an essential role in bringing a modern black idiom to fruition. There was never any doubt that white/European standards were the only yardstick, since they were 'universal' (as the review 'Outstanding Exhibits at Eshowe Native Agricultural Show' (1938) makes clear: "Exhibits ... were of an exceptionally high standard and well worthy to be compared in workmanship with European products").

Characteristically, the influence of the white intermediary is met by a contradictory discourse

of simultaneous (over)acknowledgement and erasure. The tendency is to perceive European influence on Africans as either corrupting or salvaging, depending on whether the notion of the 'noble savage' or the 'cannibal savage' prevailed. Both notions are prevalent in apartheid-era texts, where white influence on black artists is either regarded as corruptive, or as the agent of the salvation of 'black culture'. In fact, despite their seemingly irreconcilable underpinnings, both paradigms often appear in the same text – see, for instance, Battiss' statement about the destabilising effect of European influence on the African artist. He suggests that since "the European culture has thrown the African artist off his course in relation to his tribal traditions of art", it is the responsibility of the European teacher to remedy this condition by "supplying him with some form of stabilizing force" (1967: 20). The ambivalence towards the role of the white mediator displayed by authors such as Beier and McEwen (which I briefly discussed in Chapter 3) is therefore also evident in South African art writing.

Strongly contradictory opinions were expressed about the (un)desirability of formal art training for prospective black artists. Only rarely, and then mainly in the earliest literatures, was the quintessentially colonialist view expressed that white art tuition had to take care not to encourage harmful African superstitions and 'primitive' cultural practices. Thus Sadler (1935) suggested:

So long as the plastic arts are entangled with superstition and so long as the allurements of those superstitions retains any measure of power, it would be against public interest to reinforce their obsolescent authority by artistic propaganda, which, through the schools, might imprint in the minds of the children, a wrong conception of the validity of the claims upon their capacity for belief, and tempt them to the renewal of ritual habits from which their elders are shaking themselves free (in Jephson 1989: 26).

A much more frequent refrain was that art training was undesirable for black artists since it would destroy spontaneity and interfere with the innately African character of the artist's work. In this view, an extinct 'traditional' African art constituted the classical highpoint of African culture; all that followed represented a fall or decay. The prime cause for this decay was the European presence in Africa. Battiss typifies such a view (1952) when he says "we come to accept the aboriginal art as something belonging to the past and moreover our continual disappointment in never being able to find anything exciting in contemporary art products of the Bantu led us to expect nothing but the decay of Bantu work through contact with disruptive European attitude".

The conviction that formal training threatened the 'spontaneous' creativity of the African had a profound influence upon emerging modern black artists. Numerous instances are recounted where the 'patron' or 'discoverer' of an artist actively hindered the artist's attempts to obtain art training in order to prevent 'contamination' of his innate creativity. Dr John Holloway, Ntuli's 'discoverer' and 'patron', for instance, insisted that he should receive no art training (Sack 1988: 11; Miles 1997: 37). Miles (1997: 69-70) also recounts how Gerard Bhengu tried to obtain permission to study at the University of Natal but was turned down on a similar pretext, and describes the difficulties Pemba encountered in his long and frustrating quest for formal training. When artists did receive training, it was often interpreted negatively. Caccia writes how the author known only by the initials W.R.M. of the *Cape Times* (1930), was not impressed by Tladi's work: "Incidentally, it was of interest to note the work of the native artist Moses Tladi who, I understand, has been receiving tuition, and whose outlook has lost its original naivety and directness and has become somewhat academic and stilted" (in Caccia 1993: 12). Considering that this review was written in response to Tladi's work on the 1930 *South African Academy Exhibition*, which was the first public display of his art, it is extremely unlikely that the reviewer ever saw the artist's work before. He therefore *assumes* an 'original naivety and directness' that has been 'lost' in favour of the 'stilted and academic' style purportedly induced by the artist's training. This is particularly ironic in light of the opinions of other reviewers, who interpreted Tladi's art as naive and untutored (as recounted by Miles (1997: 64)). The notion arises that artists who received no formal training are more 'authentic' and 'sincere' than artists who did: "Michael Zondi never received formal art training. He developed his own distinctive, personal and honest style spontaneously." ('Michael Zondi' 1975).

The view of formal teaching as 'corruptive' rests on the view that Africa constituted the source of the artist's authenticity, while Western modernity either added an overlay of sophistication to this base Africanness, or tempted the artist into '*indiscriminate borrowing*' (to use Verstraete's phrase again). Thus one reviewer, Duke, feared that Nkosi's encounter with London might mar the authenticity of his art and render it 'invalid':

But there is one thing Mr Booth fears – that the tremendous experience of coming to London to exhibit might swing [Stanley] Nkosi's style to something new. 'I hope he is not tempted to change his style. He will surely lose his validity if he does', Mr Booth said (Duke, undated, *Stanley finds his place in the sun*).

The earliest writings on an emerging black cultural modernity did not disguise their authors' inclinations to view this phenomenon as evidential of African artists' *'fidelity to themselves and the Wild'*. Any Western intervention must take care not to interfere with this *'picturesque native outlook'*:

Obviously, the appeal of these workers is due to their fidelity to themselves and the Wild. The "raw" native for this reason makes the best craftsman. He knows no other world. And until white civilisation claims him, he will continue to interpret Africa in his own way. Art training for natives – when it comes – must follow native lines and preserve the native outlook. And what can be more picturesque than this outlook? Is it not part of the age-old spirit of Africa? ('Native Art', 1930).

Cheales (1976) similarly proposes that European intervention could spoil the authenticity of the African's innate creativity. He suggests that the modern black artist creates

with a more spontaneously eager and earthy enthusiasm. This is to the good, for too often the African artist can lose a vigorous individuality when he works as he feels the European expects him to: managing somehow to 'see' his own work through European eyes, and losing a certain virility even as he discovers sophistication.

The source of modern black artists' creative power is this physical, and even sexual, African *'vigour'* and *'virility'*. The 'discovery of sophistication' occurs when the artist self-consciously 'works as *he feels* the European expects him to'. The artist's attempt at sophistication amounts to a misguided – and even vain – misinterpretation of *'what the European expects'*.³²³ These attempts at sophistication do not signify the artist's agency or individualism, but the exact opposite – namely his simultaneous dependence on and inability to grasp *'what the European expects'*. Any sign of technical accomplishment discomfits the author as a signifier of inauthentic and emasculating sophistication: "In other words, his individuality is on the point of being swamped by too-clean perfection. Meticulousness such as this will appeal to many, but it shows a Dumile robbed of much strength and robustness" (Kerr 1968). In a review on Winston Saoli, Cheales (1970c) expresses a similar sentiment:

All in all, this is a show of superlative talent that nevertheless leaves me faintly disturbed by (ironically enough) the almost masterly precision of the work and the

³²³ Greenwood (cited in Rosen) (1993: 17) contemptuously describes much contemporary African art as "either degenerate curio fare or pathetic attempts at accommodation within the European tradition".

clear decision of the mind which, nevertheless, add up to drawings that might be superb but seem to be utterly passionless.

The message of the undesirability of formal art training was, however, substantially undercut by ambivalence. White tuition, while potentially corruptive, was nonetheless needed to free the black artist from the deeply encultured conventionalism of his traditions. Battiss thus recommends “responsible guidance” on the part of the European teacher – the teacher must “ensure that their development is impeded neither by a sterile tribal tradition (or more often, merely a meagre residue of that tradition)”, nor should the teacher “spoil” their talent by trying “to make them purely imitative, in the most formal and conventional way” (1967: 20). It is inferred that the natural tendency of the black artist is to be *‘purely imitative’* – the European teacher is therefore indispensable as facilitator or conductor of the evolutionary shift towards innovation and artistic individuation. The white teacher can either *‘spoil’* them (by encouraging their propensity for mimesis) or *‘guide’* them (by encouraging their innate artistic vitality).

Despite the frequent refrain that white interference was corruptive, it was often implied – even overtly stated - that the products of formally trained black artists were superior to those of self-taught artists. Sack recounts how the judges of the May Esther Bedford Art Competition of 1937 favoured the more ‘schooled’ work of Pemba over the ‘self-taught’ art of Sekoto (1989: 11). De Jager, while frequently celebrating the spontaneity and expressive power of untaught artists, just as frequently praised artists for their sophisticated command of Western materials and techniques. Scholz, who praised the minimal-tuition methods in one passage in *Phafa Nyika*, lists lack of formal training as the most important ‘threat’ to modern black art in another: “Isolation, loss of self-assertiveness and identity through lack of cultural tradition and, most important, lack of formal training, are the main threats to the proper development of contemporary Black art in South Africa” (1980: 143). Most emphatically, as we shall see later, the ambiguity emerges in the lavish praise heaped on white teachers and facilitators (such as Skotnes, Beier, Defosses and McEwen) for bringing about a revolutionary Modern black art through *not* teaching!

The High Modernist paradigm significantly contributed towards the simultaneous celebration and disavowal of white tutelage. The following passage by Beier (quoted in Battiss 1967: 20) demonstrates the impact High Modernist conceptions of the artist and artistic tradition had on the interpretation of white administered and taught schools in Africa:

Artists, it is said, are born and not made. But the school has its part to play in liberating the personality from inhibitions and conventions so that the mind can create freely. In Nigeria this involves the difficult task of a revaluation of traditional culture. The new Nigerian generation must come to terms with the past before it can pass on to a creative future. Only then can we hope that Nigeria will have another contribution to make to the world of art that is as important and revolutionary as that of its traditional wood-carving and brass-casting.

This passage encodes a few pivotal Modernist axioms: artistic ability is represented as innate, the rejection of tradition is seen as a precondition for creative liberation and innovation, and it is implied that art is a national phenomenon. *'Artists are born and not made'* unambiguously articulates the Modernist conviction that artistic ability is spontaneous and genetically encoded – which would support the supposition that teaching is superfluous since the ability to be an artist cannot be cultivated.³²⁴ But the conviction that the West represents the vanguard of all cultural development precludes the possibility of an African cultural modernity that is arrived at without white facilitation – hence Western intervention is needed to liberate the artist from the inherited *'inhibitions and conventions'* of his traditional African culture (which, as we have seen, is regarded as particularly stifling and rigid). Yet a complete rejection of African tradition is problematic since such a disavowal would deny the artist's essential African heritage (and nature) and he would additionally run the risk of merely superficially imitating Western artistic paradigms. For this reason, African artistic traditions must be explained by the Western expert so that they can be suitably *'revalued'* (simultaneously resisted and valued) by the artist: "The new generation *must* come to terms with the past [ie tradition] before it can pass on to a creative future [modernity and the freedom it bestows as essential condition of creativity]". This process is a precondition (*"Only then can we hope..."*) for the attainment of the next (ie not yet achieved) stage of cultural development. *'Only then'* will Nigeria have another contribution to make to world culture (note the use of the artist as metonym of the nation, and the implication that Nigeria is distinct from/not yet part of, *'the world of art'*).

Beier's perception of African cultural traditions is fundamentally paradoxical. Africa's rich heritage of 'traditional' art is seen as a hindrance (because it inhibits the young black artist by tying him to age-old conventions and rigid tribal prescriptions), yet represents the most vitally

³²⁴ Snyman quotes McEwen as suggesting that: "Instead of teaching, in the sense of cramming the unformed mind with foreign information, example and imposed subject matter, it is accepted, from the start, that the sensitive, latent artist possesses the spirit of art to be brought out, respected and nurtured" (1978: 18).

'important and revolutionary' contribution the African has made to world culture. African tradition becomes simultaneously something that must be overcome, and an impossible high standard to aspire to. The tradition itself is contradictory since it is at once rigid and dogmatic (the very antithesis of creativity) yet 'revolutionary' (because it has generated a revolutionary response in Western artists). The black artist is thus given the impossible task of attaining freedom through dependency (on the white teacher as well as his traditions).

The value attached to cultural traditions was exacerbated in the South African context by the apartheid state's emphasis on 'volk' and 'kultuur' in Christian Nationalist education. The conception of 'Bantu Education' and separate educational systems for different population groups was not only the implementation of a policy which aimed at turning the majority of the country's population into proletarians ('hewers of wood and haulers of water', in Verwoerd's notorious words), but also put into effect the conviction that the very character (*eiesoortigheid*) of any particular 'volk' resided in the uniqueness of its cultural traditions. In an edition of *Bantu* (which served as mouthpiece for the Government's policies on 'Bantu culture'), Basson (1976a) paraphrases a speech delivered by the then Prime Minister, BJ Vorster, at a national cultural festival in Tulbach: "[T]he Prime Minister rightly said that no nation, no community and no individual of any language group whatsoever, could afford to neglect the cultural treasures of his country, his art and his heritage." De Jager implicitly endorses Bantu education and suggests that it played a substantial role in the development of modern black art:

By the 1960s the general educational standard of blacks had also greatly improved, both qualitatively and quantitatively. This gave rise to a large number of individuals with a broadened outlook on life – recognizing their own creative needs and abilities (1987: 210).³²⁵

Not surprisingly, Basson (researcher for the Department of Information's journal *Bantu*), portrays the encounter with Christianity and white guidance as a blessing and a progressive leap forward for the black artist:

Their tapestries, executed by the KwaZulu people, reflect the expression of the traditional African art in service of a new religion: the giant step taken by Africans who, up till recently, had been absorbed in the traditions and cults of tribal life and had then taken on teachings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and come to terms with the culture of their teachers. The result of this had been an art strongly

³²⁵ This is particularly ironic considering that art tuition was sorely neglected at black schools during the apartheid era in favour of 'authentic traditional' crafts such as basket-weaving.

reminiscent of the art of the early Christians in mediaeval Europe, but with a strength and virility and also a certain naïve freedom, which is truly African" (1973).

The contact with an 'enlightened' Christianity and modern teaching is not only *'a giant step'* forward (into an art reminiscent of early Christian and mediaeval Europe!), but also compliments the artist's *'true'* Africanness - which manifests as *'strength and virility'* and as *'a certain naïve freedom'* that can be put *'in service'* of the new religion.

Mostly, however, white teachers and institutions are lauded as facilitators of the black artist's cultural *eiesoortigheid*. In this regard, writing on the Polly Street art centre serves as particularly apt example. There is not a single general text on modern South African black art that does not mention the Polly Street art centre (Skotnes in particular) as a primary influence in the establishment of a modern black 'art movement'.³²⁶ Berman (1974: 211) for instance, ascribes the emergence of 'Township Art' entirely to the Polly Street arts centre – without mentioning the existence, let alone the possible influence, of 'pioneers' such as Mohl, Sekoto, Pemba and Mancoba. While it is undoubtedly true, as I have also stated in my own contextual background, that the Polly Street arts centre was of major importance in the establishment of a community of black artists, it is seldom mentioned that tuition at this centre (since it was a voluntary and part-time occupation), occurred only intermittently³²⁷ and that Skotnes, like Defosses, McEwen and Beier in other parts of Africa, followed a policy of 'minimal interference' in accordance with the notion that tutelage would 'spoil' the authentic vision of the black artist.³²⁸ I am making this point not to diminish Skotnes' laudable contribution, but to put the centre's influence on contemporary black art in perspective. Accompanying the over-articulation of Skotnes' role, is the denial of the considerable influence that the members of Polly Street had on one another.³²⁹ The solidarity and mutual assistance between artists who joined the centre are not commented on, with the result that black agency in the establishment of a modern black art praxis is radically underplayed. Not only is Skotnes' contribution over-articulated, but he is praised for adopting an educational policy of minimum interference.

³²⁶ Berman (1974); Sack (1988); Snyman (1978); Scholz (1980) Verstraete (1989); De Jager (1973 and 1992) – to name only the most influential publications.

³²⁷ In an interview Louis Maqhubela told me that a maximum of 3 hours teaching took place per week at Polly Street; moreover that this teaching entailed little direct tuition - in accordance with Skotnes' conviction that white interference had to be minimised.

³²⁸ It is significant that the black artist and writer, David Koloane, is one of the few writers who not only mentions but also criticises this policy (1989).

³²⁹ Maqhubela mentions, for instance, numerous 'field trips' to do landscape drawing that were spontaneously undertaken by members of the Polly Street centre. He also remembers the generosity of employed artists who bought materials for those who were without steady incomes (Van Robbroeck 1995).

Snyman (1978: 96), for instance, commends Skotnes for not obstructing a 'black vision' and for allowing artists to 'retain' the African character of their work.

Like Beier in Nigeria, who saw the role of art schools in Africa primarily as an opportunity to familiarise a 'new generation' of artists with their own heritages, Skotnes was intent on reintroducing young black South African artists to the cultural traditions of Africa.³³⁰ This concern can be seen as the logical extension of what Clifford (1986) aptly calls the 'salvage paradigm' – which not only regarded African cultures and lifestyles as threatened (in evolutionary terms on the brink of extinction), but also regarded European intervention as the only way to 'save' or at least partially salvage these dying traditions. The 'salvage paradigm' even exerted an influence on black artistic self-representation – thus BICA (the Bantu, Indian and Coloured Art Group), was established in 1951 "to give non-Europeans a chance of studying art, to encourage European interest and to preserve the racial characteristics of this indigenous work". In addition: "The artists are taught the use of materials and technique rather than what to paint or how to express themselves: they are discouraged from imitating European art" ('Art needs patrons', 1951).

Snyman's interpretation of Skotnes' role at Polly Street rests on excessive confidence in the powers of the white culture-broker (as an external facilitator that can 'unlock' the African artist's uniquely African nature), yet denies the degree to which the white agent actively orchestrated the 'new' African art. The fact that Skotnes showed the artists prints of 'traditional' West and Central African art and generally tended to encourage artists who worked in a recognisably Africanist mode, is not recognised as teaching. Snyman's interpretation of white tutelage is thus also typical in the way it disavows white interference. He suggests, for instance, that the pioneer artists - whose work he dismisses as the illustrative result of 'merely copying' European traditions - made way for a more spontaneous expression of a 'typical African idiom' in the work of the Polly Street generation.³³¹ He ascribes this shift, ironically, to the 'informal education' (the minimal interference or absentee-tuition) they received from Skotnes (1978: 98) – presumably since 'minimal interference' allowed the 'natural' and 'innate' Africanness of their work to surface and flourish.

³³⁰ According to Snyman, Skotnes got this idea from Jack Grossert, who headed art training at the Ndoleni teachers training centre in Natal, and who later became a very influential inspector of art education at 'native schools' (1978: 97). Grossert also recommended a policy of 'minimal educational interference' in schools in order to preserve a 'cultural *eiesoortigheid*'.

³³¹ Verstraete repeats this sentiment: "Through white patronage they were introduced to various materials and techniques, but their works show only a superficial adoption of the Western art tradition" (1989: 154).

This intention to preserve an authentic African culture informed most teaching practices in South Africa, even at missionary colleges:

Sister Pientia Selhorst, an artist and teacher of art at Mariannhill Training College, does not allow her 50 African pupils to copy any European conception of art ... She has the strongest convictions that Africans must become conscious of their own cultural background, even if it is primitive She says, of her pupils: 'They do not appreciate their own background. Too many want to copy European tradition, but they should develop from the roots of their own culture' ('Nun Teaches Natives Art', 1951).

The following statement by Snyman (which I translated rather literally to retain its implications) indicates the contradictions inherent in the perceived 'salvage role' of the white teacher:

Skotnes was aware of the fact that most of his pupils no longer had a traditional consciousness and knowledge of traditional art. Yet he wanted to bring home an inherent (own) nature in their work. Initially he did this by leading the artists back to their own past by familiarising them with objects such as clay pots, combs, beadwork and headrests, as well as prints of traditional African Art (1978: 98).³³²

Beier and Snyman thus both reiterate the notion that an authentic and inherent character has to be *induced* by the Western teacher by leading the artists '*back to their past*'.³³³ The teacher (presumably by virtue of his race and his learning) is thus an expert on the culture of the Other: "Skotnes and his assistants taught their pupils to retain what was theirs, what was inherent in their African way of thinking and feeling" (Scholz 1980: 143).

The European's role is to assist the modern black artist without substantively affecting his authentic African style – in fact, it is the task of the European teacher to facilitate a natural

³³² "Skotnes was terdeë bewus van die feit dat die meeste van sy leerlinge nie meer 'n tradisionele bewussyn en kennis van die tradisionele kuns gehad het nie. Tog wou hy 'n eie karakter in hulle werk tuisbring. Aanvanklik het hy dit probeer doen deur die kunstenaars terug te lei na hulle verlede deur hulle bekend te maak met voorwerpe soos kleipotte, kamme, kralewerk en koprusse, asook afdrukke van tradisionele Afrika-kuns" (1978: 98).

³³³ Numerous other authors express the conviction that white mediation is needed to revive African traditions: "Another factor bound up with the question of tradition is that South African Black artists should be introduced to the traditional art of Black Africa" (Scholz 1980: 142); in a newspaper article in *The Star*, titled *Arts of primitive peoples: important lecture by German anthropologist* (1940), Dr Leonard Adam states: "Today we are faced with modern African art successfully reviving not only techniques but also old designs. It appears that the educated African who can, of course, no longer be called "primitive," has regained through the aid of his European teachers the full appreciation of the art of his ancestors"; and Berman: "Initially Cecil Skotnes set out to promote an indigenous African artistic idiom among his students. He introduced them to Cubist forms since these coincided with his knowledge of traditional African sculptural conventions" (1983: 339).

evolutionary process, and to guide the artist so that his 'natural' inclinations may develop unimpeded. Thus one newspaper review suggests that "Since carving and modelling are the most natural form of expression to African, clay, brick clay and even concrete have been used as mediums for teaching primary construction." The term employed by this author to describe this method of teaching is 'guided evolution': "One of the most striking examples of the success of this guided evolution is the remarkable model of an ox by Malapyane – an adult version of the African child's 'clay oxen'" ('Guided Native Artists' Skill in Paint and Stone', 1958).

Partly the emphasis on white tuition seems to flow from an inability to conceive of black teachers or patrons. Scholz, for instance, refers to the team of expatriate Europeans - Defosses, McEwen and Beier – as "the great teachers in Africa" and suggests that "We in this country are fortunate in having such teacher potential. There are a number of young Whites who have the sensitivity to communicate with the Black artists on a level beneficial to both" (1980: 144). Scholz ascribes the success of the white teacher in Africa at least partly to the African's belief in 'vital force' – a concept she gleans from the populist theories of the Belgian priest, Placide Tempels:

The Black man based his experience of the European upon this concept of vital force. Western technological skill seemed to make the European master of very strong natural forces. He therefore was regarded as holding a superior rank in the universe of forces, surpassing the vital force of all Africans (Scholz 1980: 9).

Scholz adds that, despite changes in this belief in 'vital force', it remained 'subconsciously' the Black artists' "strongest spiritual resource in their changing way of life" (1980: 10). Thus modern black art - interpreted since the 1930s by contemporary African nationalist writers as proof of the African's ability to master Western culture - is reduced to mere superstitious awe and mimicry. Scholz maintains that "Black artists are most reticent about their teachers. They have – again probably borrowing the European concept of elitism – the urge to create the impression of being completely self-taught, so as to be considered prodigees (sic)" (1980: 143). Yet, Scholz maintains, "The Black artists in general are still in a situation where they wish to have contact with the White artists. They want to be told what to do and how to do it. They crave for a western artistic background" (1980: 140). In addition, the white viewer is warned against lavishing too much praise on black artists since they are "not yet psychologically ready to resist elitist views of themselves instilled by European admirers" (1980: 15). The threat of African Modernist independence is thus neutralised and Western cultural supremacy re-established.

There is a tendency, in all the literatures concerned, to overemphasise the importance of the white patron, 'discoverer' or teacher: "Of late, Winston [Saoli] tells me that he has been working in Bill Ainslie's studio, and I think the supervision of such an artist has helped Saoli to produce the mystically poetic oil paintings which are possibly the most significant feature of this exhibition" (Winder1971). The artist Lippy Lipschitz said of Mancoba: "It was undoubtedly Brother Roger's friendship, and the influence of certain sculptors like Elsa Dziomba or myself that developed the very interesting style of this remarkable African artist" (1951). In an interview with Maqhubela in London in 1995, the artist pointed out to me that all the literature repeat that he received tuition from Guiseeppe Cattaneo.³³⁴ In fact he met Cattaneo only once (ironically in a failed attempt to get into the University of the Witwatersrand art school), during which encounter Cattaneo gave him some Conté crayons and briefly showed him how to use them.³³⁵

Since it is often stated that the modern black artist's command of Western artistic methods is not up to scratch (for example Scholz: "Many Black artists today dream of exhibiting in European galleries even though their works are not yet up to standard" (1980: 143)), it is suggested that their success in the art market must be ascribed to hypocritical white support and the injudiciousness of the white cultural broker. Snyman, for instance, ascribes Sekoto's success partly to the leftist sympathies of members of "the new group" (ie artists such as Gregoire Boonzaaier and Max Gordon) who were keen to recognise the cultural output of 'the Bantu': "One can therefore not avoid the fact that Sekoto's position as Bantu invited a certain positive evaluation of his work from a socio-political standpoint" (1978: 85).³³⁶ Likewise Scholz criticises white liberals for lending unqualified support to inferior black artists. She makes the extraordinary claim that local South African whites tend not to support black art because it makes them "feel uncomfortable", and suggests that support emanates largely from "liberal circles often consisting of foreigners living in this country" who tend to display a "lack of selectiveness with regard to artistic merit" (1980:14-15). Later in the same text, Scholz again

³³⁴ For instance: "Louis Maqhubela was born in 1939 in Durban, went to school in Johannesburg and studied for some time under Cecil Skotnes at the Polly Street Art Centre and under Guiseeppe Cattaneo" (De Beer 1974).

³³⁵ By contrast the writer Lola Watter, in the alternative African nationalist cultural journal *The Classic*, uses interviews with the artist to list the very particular and idiosyncratic influences that acted in on his work; and in the process foregrounds the deliberate, conscious agency that his aesthetic choices imply: "[F]rom these sources [Zen Buddhism and the romantic poets], and from his own meditations on experienced reality, he formulates his ideas. These poems he considers merely an adjunct – a clearing-ground – for the crystallisation of images. Maqhubela's plastic conceptions are then not the results of mere automatism, accidentally caused, but the fruit of his mystical and philosophical meditations" (1969: 26).

³³⁶ "Daar sou dus nie weggekome kon word van die feit dat Sekoto se posisie as Bantoe 'n sekere positiewe waardering van sy werk vanuit sosio-politieke oorwegings ontlok het nie" (Snyman 1978: 85).

lambastes the “foreign diplomats” (with their “elitist atmosphere”!) for “robbing” the Blacks of “their heritage” by encouraging their inferior artistic attempts (1980: 142). While Fransen (1982: 363) does not blame ‘foreigners’ as such, he also ascribes the commercialisation of modern black art to injudicious white support: “A fair market for such art-works exists among the more liberal-minded suburban white public. This has tempted more than one artist to repeat the same themes and the same stylized forms over and over again until they have lost most of their originality and power” (1980: 363). For Scholz, however, this repetitiveness is not only the result of the commercialisation of black art, but also demonstrates an inherent African cultural trait: “It would seem as if they all fall back on the kind of repetitiveness which characterizes traditional art” (1980: 15).

The contradictory approach to white involvement arguably emanates from the need, on the one hand, to recognise modern black art as essentially African (and hence Other and different), while, on the other hand, stressing its dependency on Western culture (and hence reifying Western superiority). A completely autonomous and authentic African Modernism would suggest that Africans were capable of arriving at modernity of their own volition, which would destroy one of the key rationalisations for the colonial enterprise (ie the need to uplift the savage into a state of civilisation). Wright argues that: “In his Philosophy of History, Hegel argues that only enslavement by the European allows for the possibility of the Black achieving subject status ... the Negro is nothing without European instruction” (2004: 86). She also points out that Hegel’s ‘logic’ that slavery was the only way in which the Negro might eventually become a subject, validated absolute dependency on white instruction (2004: 87). Likewise, “Gobineau argued that the Negro’s lack of intellectual ability meant that he was simply the ink pen that needed to be guided by the Aryan hand” (Wright 2004: 69). Another possible reason for the need to endorse white mediation was because an abrupt and sudden emergence of an autonomous African modernity ran counter to the notion that cultural evolution occurred universally according to established gradations of a systematically unfolding telos. The evolutionist model was thus threatened by the sudden (unprecedented and unmediated) emergence of African cultural modernity.

Although the need for a ‘gentle white hand’ is continually asserted, recognition that modern black art might largely be the product of white tutelage or Western influence contains the implicit threat of cultural sameness and raises the spectre that mastery of the dominant culture is within the reach of all colonised subjects. It would be evidence of the African artist’s ability “to hack into the exclusive space of the antipode, in other words to possess the contested

territory by mastering the forms and techniques of Western artistic expression in order to cross out the ideological principles resident in its exclusivity" (Oguibe 2002: 245). For this reason, strategies had to be devised to disown 'excessive' accomplishment as inferior mimicry. Thus black Modernists are frequently accused of merely imitating the Western conventions they were taught. The implication is that contemporary Western aesthetics, conventions and techniques are too complex and sophisticated to be mastered by the colonial subject: "Seen against the background of his cultural difference, the artist often approached this European influence materially and formalistically, with the result that the early works [of the pioneers] display a strongly illustrative, narrative and even dilettantish quality" (Snyman 1978: 88).³³⁷

It is not unlikely that this view was propagated to contain the threat posed by the 'perverse self portrait' (to use Bhabha's evocative description) reflected in the cultural mirror held up by black artists working in a Western paradigm (1984). For Bhabha the "mimicry" performed by the colonised subject is subversive precisely *because* it derives from Western cultural models. The colonial subject's uncanny transformation of the familiar "distorts [the colonialist's] outline, breaches his boundaries, repeats his actions at a distance, disturbs and divides the very time of his being ... Man as his alienated image, not Self and Other but the 'Otherness' of the Self inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity" (Bhabha quoted in Young 1990: 153). Thus mimicry is "at once resemblance and menace". The colonialist's narcissistic self-image (which powered him to extend the humanist invitation to assimilate), is undone by the ambiguity bred by the acceptance of that invitation. The mastery and the sameness of the 'modern universal man' are undermined by his black mirror image. The above analysis suggests that the modern black artists' construction of a modern 'civilised' African identity simultaneously fed white narcissism, and undermined it. It is therefore essential that the black artist's mastery of Western traditions must be undone through the suggestion that it was not mastery but mere imitation; and that it still contained elements of essential difference:

[T]he early contribution to Bantu-art in South Africa is characterised by the acquisition and even superficial imitation of the Western tradition, but

³³⁷ "Gesien teen die agtergrond van sy kulturele andersoortigheid, het die kunstenaar hierdie Europese invloed dikwels materieel en formalisties benader, sodat daar 'n sterk illustratiewe, narratiewe en miskien selfs dilettantiese aspek in die vroeë werk oorbly. Sodoende het die negatiewe aspek wat die nuwe kuns in Afrika kenmerk, soos die van kommersialisering en illustrasie, nie by Suid-Afrika verbygegaan nie" (1978: 88).

simultaneously also constitutes the use of this knowledge to establish a new and *eiesoortige* idiom by means of a unique formal language (Snyman 1978: 89).³³⁸

Thus the colonial subject can achieve only a partial representation of modern, 'civilised' man, for he remains inevitably "not quite/not white" (Bhabha 1984: 127). According to Oguibe, (2002: 245): "The deracination of material cultures among the colonized on the one hand, and the prohibition of access to Western/school art on the other, provided perfect conditions for the manufacture of the mimic man, the utilitarian craftsman with no traditions of great art and no access to Imperial Enlightenment".³³⁹

Contemporary black responses to white art educational policies and patronage present, not surprisingly, a significantly different perspective, and indicate the extent to which black opinions about education were disregarded or simply never solicited. Dhlomo, who ardently believed that the Nationalist quest of the African could only be realised through modernisation, deplored the fact that so few organisations offered sound technical teaching – a neglect that inhibited the African's growth towards a detribalised and urbanised identity (1947a).³⁴⁰ He called for independent black artists' collectives to meet this need. For Ngubane (1949) the acquisition of skills enables the black artist's quest to represent the interests and plight of the colonised African:

He [Sekoto] has consistently refused to see the African as a picturesque creature. To him the acquisition of more skill has meant he must paint with deeper feeling for, and active sympathy with, that African whose soul is daily being crushed and bruised in his own Africa.

The black press also provided publicity for Mohl's initiative to start an independent art school in Sophiatown (*Africans Taught the Art of Painting* 1944), in which Mohl is quoted as saying that "a very high percentage of talent lies buried. It is for Africans themselves to unearth it, train it and enable it to make its full contribution to the culture of our country".

4.2.7 Conclusion

The Babel of voices articulating the nature of modern black art must have had a profound impact on the practising black artist. Attempts to follow the numerous conflicting prescriptions,

³³⁸ "... die vroeë bydraes tot kontemporere Bantoeekuns in Suid-Afrika [word] dus gekenmerk deur 'n aanleer en selfs oppervlakkige nabootsing van die Westerse skilderkunstradisie, maar terselfdertyd ook 'n gebruikmaking van hierdie kennis om 'n nuwe en eiesoortige idioom met 'n unieke vormtaal daar te stel" (Snyman 1978: 89).

³³⁹ Oguibe also suggests that it opened up two possibilities of resistance: persisting with indigenous forms, or to "hack into the exclusive space of the antipode".

³⁴⁰ For a very insightful biography of Dhlomo, see Couzens (1985).

proscriptions, pronouncements and advice offered by an array of white patrons, brokers and teachers could only have generated the most acute frustration. The radical marginalisation and racist stereotyping of the black artist - couched in a condescending discourse disingenuously masked as paternalistic concern - served to keep the modern black artist in his marginal place. In this regard, autobiographies by black artists provide much insight. Sekoto, for instance, describes an encounter with a white artist (possibly Alexis Preller) as surprising because "he took a liking to my paintings and spoke to me in a tone that surprised me then, for he spoke as a human being talking to another" (1957: 79). He also describes the limited prospects and psychological burden of being a black artist in South Africa (1957: 289):

a) ... the South African Negro artist at present has a very narrow room in which to roam, with comparatively shameful possibilities to meet his material needs, b) a very thin chance to exchange ideas, as he is being refused in all the schools of art and social gatherings, c) ... being exposed from day to day to such scenes, that have taught him to close his eyes and hide his tears ...

As the texts I cite belong to a humanist tradition of writing, they make frequent mention of the black artists' membership of a 'universal brotherhood' - yet, as has been demonstrated, they also relentlessly overdetermine the difference of the modern black artist. These ambiguities are not unique to South African art writing, but should rather be seen as the product of an aporia at the heart of the humanist tradition - the central paradox of universality and difference.

The High Modernist cultural paradigm adds to this ambivalence by representing the artist as supreme example of the individuated Enlightenment subject, while simultaneously propagating art as a 'universal language'. To compound this ambiguity, art is also regarded as both autonomously developing phenomenon and as signifier of a particular socio-cultural identity. Recurrent modernist figures are employed to encompass the anomaly of the 'modern' black artist: the suffering and estranged urbanite; the exceptionally sensitive and gifted visionary; the cultural representative of his race or ethnic group; the conduit of an autonomously evolving art of Africa. Most of the contradictions in these discourses, however, emanate from the Romantic notion of the artist as supreme individualist and the simultaneous assumption of the communality of all black culture.

Some of the contradictions in the discursive construction of a modern black subjectivity inhere in the very nature of art history as discipline. Preziosi (1998: 512) points out that art history has

been pivotal to the entrenchment of the 'universal' Enlightenment subject. Through art history, the artist has been represented as a paragon of agency:

[Art history] was, and remains, an organizing concept which has made certain Western notions of the subject more vividly palpable (its unity, uniqueness, self-sameness, spirit, non-reproducibility, and so on); in this regard it recapitulates some of the effects of the earlier invention of central-point perspective.

This High Modernist valorisation of the individuality and will of the great innovative artist stood in a tense relationship to the notion of an autonomous art spirit that follows its own evolutionary trajectory. The Hegelian concept of an autonomous evolving art spirit - which demanded that artistic development should follow an inexorable, internal logic - contradicts the Enlightenment conception of the artist as the locus of meaning. The artist is simultaneously viewed as mere conduit of the independently progressing art spirit (which usually reflects a particular national or ethnic ethos), and as the source of a profoundly individual statement. In relation to the modern black artist, the tension between an autonomous art spirit and the autonomy of the artist becomes all the more pronounced, since centuries of modernist presuppositions about a collective Africa preclude the possibility of a fully individuated modern African artist. In addition, the anthropological heritage of culturalism provided a tradition of looking at the art object as evidential of the distinctness of the cultural monad, which also functioned in tense relationship with the Modernist perception of the artist as supreme individual.

Given the sustained attack on his dignity and worth, it is perhaps not surprising that the modern black artist was seduced by the promise that art constituted a liberated language that offered him access to a universal brotherhood of man. In his autobiography, Sekoto (1957: 282) reveals his belief in art as the lingua franca of a liberated humanity: "At the time I could not understand why she [a white patron of his art] was so colour blind, yet now I know that Art is an interior human language and accepts no colour bar". Yet the place reserved for the black artist in this 'universal brotherhood' remained the marginal domain of the African urban sphere – the township. Although genius, in the High Modernist paradigm, is regarded as innate rather than cultivated, the true (European) Modernist visionary is also the sophisticated product of centuries of painstaking cultural evolution. The European Modernist's rejection of cultural traditions presupposed a profound intellectual understanding of the cultural heritage of the West. To celebrate the spontaneous and the innovatory, the Modernist artist first had to possess the education and sophistication to recognise and (only then) reject the conventions and the contrivance of tradition. It stands to reason that, in order to return to and celebrate the

'primitive originary roots' of the creative process, the artist must first have departed from them. The trappings of civilisation first had to be attained (or inherited) before they could be shucked off. Oguibe (2000: 244) proposes that: "Within colonial discourse art and aesthetic sensibility were crucial signifiers of the civilized station, and constituted the unbridgeable distance between savagery and culture". While the 'innate sensitivities' of the black artist qualify him as a true artist, his unbridled emotionalism declares his uncultured savagery and thus re-establishes distance and difference from the European Modernist.

CHAPTER 5

THE 'RESISTANCE PARADIGM'

Within the realm of ideology ... history is experienced by subjects as a purposive continuum, with themselves as its subject (Young 1990: 62).

In the late 1980s three glossy new publications appeared that signalled a seismic discursive shift in the approach to contemporary black art. Younge's *Art of the South African Townships* (1988), Sack's *Neglected Tradition* (1989), and Williamson's *Resistance Art in South Africa* (1989) articulated a consciously political approach that attempted to situate the practice of historical black artists (in the case of Sack) and contemporary artists (in the case of Williamson and Young) within the socio-political frame of apartheid South Africa.³⁴¹ While these literatures were the first full-length books to treat black art as a counter-culture to the dominant white national culture, it must be kept in mind that alternative perspectives on black cultural praxis had been published throughout the history of publication on the topic. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, black intellectuals (such as Dhlomo and Koloane) and a handful of white writers (such as Watter, Beinart, Eglington, and Simon – who all wrote for *The Classic*) provided intermittent coverage that served to counter the systematic Otherisation of their black colleagues by the dominant white establishment. But most of these texts were confined to the black press and a small and beleaguered 'alternative' white press, and as such did not significantly impact on mainstream art discourse. These 'alternative' readings gradually gained momentum in the '70s, and by the '80s the 'resistance paradigm' significantly served to decentre the colonialist tone of earlier apartheid-era discourses.

The 'resistance paradigm' formed part of the radial politicisation of the cultural arena in the '70s and '80s. This politicisation formed part of a broader escalation of political tension after the '76 Soweto uprising, but was also influenced by the New Left movement in England and America.³⁴² The Marxist critique of cultural elitism and the perceived complicity between

³⁴¹ Manaka's *Echoes of African Art* (1989) is not included in this discussion since it does not serve as apt example of resistance writing. This was an unfortunate publication marred by factual inaccuracies, sloppy scholarship, poor reproductions and derivative interpretations. Manaka's book repeated most of the problematic hermeneutical strategies employed by generations of white authors, and incongruously combined these essentialist notions with a militant resistance vocabulary to produce a text of mind-boggling contradiction and ambiguity. Manaka's writing is well worth deconstructing for someone intent on unpacking the deleterious internalisation of colonial-style essentialism by a black author steeped in a counter-essentialist black consciousness.

³⁴² The New Left was a loose, Marxist inspired affiliation of intellectuals, activists, workers, cultural practitioners and students who revolted against the expanding (and intersecting) powers of the state and the corporate sector in the tense political arena of the Cold War. The New Left's definition of state power was influenced by

cultural institutions and the repressive state motivated a drastic increase in the establishment of non-governmental organisations, including community arts centres. A number of influential and highly politicised conferences added momentum to a growing instrumentalist perception of culture as a potential weapon in the struggle for political emancipation. The first of these was the *State of Art in South Africa* Conference in CapeTown in 1979 – which I discuss in some depth since it was white organised and dominated and hence particularly revealing of the displacement of the liberal paradigm by the militant resistance paradigm. This transition generated conflicting and ambiguous discourses which I will unpack later. This conference was followed by the *Culture and Resistance Symposium* in Gaborone in 1982; and the ANC organised *Culture in Another South Africa Conference* in Amsterdam, in 1987. In these two conferences, the resistance paradigm is revealed as a militant discourse at its ideological peak, in which most of the subtle ambiguities of the more transitional *State of Art in South Africa* Conference are no longer evident. At all of these conferences, the links between politics and the South African cultural sphere were systematically explored and resolutions made regarding the promotion of a more democratic cultural dispensation.

In 1983 the United Democratic Front was launched, and with it, a campaign to promote a 'people's culture' in opposition to the dominant 'apartheid culture'.³⁴³ In response the Department of National Education dissolved the *National Cultural Council* which had concerned itself with the "preservation, promotion and advancement of the culture of the Whites in the Republic of South Africa" (*Department of National Education Annual Report* 1981: 42). In its place they introduced the *Cultural Promotion Act* (Act 35 of 1983) which concerned itself with actively propagandising a more inclusive national South African culture abroad to counteract the effects of the cultural boycott.³⁴⁴ In the process the South African art world became increasingly polarised between a 'democratic people's culture' on the one hand, and a 'dominant apartheid culture' on the other.³⁴⁵ 'Apartheid culture' was defined by Liebenberg

Althusser's conception of the state as a composite body consisting of repressive apparatuses (the police, courts, prisons, army, etc) and ideological apparatuses (churches, schools, cultural institutions, the press, etc).

³⁴³ The UDF defined 'the people' as follows: "We use 'the People' to distinguish between two major camps in our society - the enemy camp and the people's camp. The people's camp is made up of the overwhelming majority of South Africans - the black working class, the rural masses, the black petit bourgeoisie (traders) and the black middle strata (clerks, teachers, nurses, intellectuals). The people's camp also includes several thousand whites who stand shoulder to shoulder in the struggle with the majority" (McKay 1990:243).

³⁴⁴ In the process, numerous travelling black art exhibitions were sponsored by the state. This was a particularly cynical gesture, as Ozynski notes: "The state, which places every conceivable obstacle in the way of the development of black potential, and which provides no assistance whatsoever for the struggling artist, acts with perfect cynicism in using the work of black artists to whitewash apartheid in the eyes of the outside world, and to delude other countries into believing that this is a land of equal opportunity" (1979: 35).

³⁴⁵ The degree to which a 'people's culture' succeeded in antagonising the state is illustrated by the words of the then Minister of Education, FW de Klerk, in his keynote address at the 1988 conference on the arts held in

(Duncan 1989:19), then a spokesman for the UDF's Cultural Desk, as follows: "Apartheid culture is not just a matter of content, it is a matter of participating in all sorts of structures and facilities." Most cultural institutions – automatically branded instruments of 'apartheid culture' - were thus regarded with suspicion. Exponents of a 'people's culture' derided institutions which received state-funding, or that were regarded as in some way co-opted by the state. Radical cultural organisations distanced themselves from 'tainted institutions', which caused severe ideological rifts in the arts arena.³⁴⁶

The politicisation of art writing became particularly pronounced after the first State of Emergency was declared in 1985, when oppositional newspapers (such as the *Sowetan*, *Weekly Mail*, and *Vrye Weekblad*) provided fora for resistance, and a variety of short-lived cultural magazines raised increasingly more vociferous responses to the inequities of the cultural arena. Oppositional views were also more frequently aired by dissidents within the mainstream press.³⁴⁷ The titles of press articles from the '80s and early '90s indicate the politicisation of the cultural arena: '*Art of Protest*'; '*SA Artists Covered by Apartheid's Cloud*'; '*Art in the struggle: Celebrating the Power of Culture*'; '*Build a Strong Morale*'; '*Art a Weapon for the Struggle: Our Lifestyle Reflects Loss of Respect for our Culture*'; '*Black Artists: We're Fed up with 'Political' Labels*'; '*Caught Between Warring Laagers: the Liberal View*'; '*Culture Beyond Apartheid*'; '*Culture in South Africa: The Challenge of Transformation*'.

In the academic sphere, neo-Marxist theories (led by the South African born historian Shula Marks) gradually superseded liberal discourses in the '70s and '80s. In art history, Modernist formalism made way for revisionist approaches that focused on conditions of production (economic, political and social), and that relocated attention from the figure of the 'great agent-artist' to the artwork as reflective of the socio-political sphere. The neo-Marxist practices at English universities increased the ideological divisions between Afrikaans and English universities. Whereas Afrikaans-speaking writers dominated the field in the '70s (De Jager, Basson, Scholz, Snyman), almost all the publications of the '80s emanated from the English

Stellenbosch: "We are currently experiencing a revolutionary onslaught ... There are also strategies to misuse the arts to effect the total overthrow of the existing order ... If the concept of 'people's education' and 'people's art' is that which serves the revolution, then we cannot support it and must take steps in the interests of security ..." (Richards & Powell 1989). A year later the 'Towards a People's Culture Festival' was banned.

³⁴⁶ Neither of these two camps was, of course, as undivided and homogeneous as the discourse that was bandied would have one believe. Proponents of a 'people's culture' were not necessarily aligned with the Mass Democratic Movement (see, for instance, Mphahlele 1988). Africanist and Black Consciousness supporters of a 'people's culture' often refused to be associated with the UDF's Cultural Desk, and accused it of being high-handed and prescriptive (see Duncan 1989:39).

³⁴⁷ Elza Miles, reviewer of the establishment Afrikaner newspaper, *Die Beeld*, is one such example.

universities.³⁴⁸

The tension between liberalism and radicalism as differing or even competing epistemologies at English universities results in a set of ambiguities in 'resistance' literatures that, while significantly different to the ambivalences of pre-'76 discourses, nonetheless share with them some fundamental characteristics. Above all, these writings perpetuate a modernist tendency towards extreme dualism. A virulent Hegelian dialectic (under the influence of Marxist theories), generates new sets of binary oppositions arguably as reductive as the colonial binaries perpetuated in earlier literatures. In addition, South Africa's particular history of institutionalised racism, and its cultural and academic isolation in the '80s, results in a tendency to regard the local cultural sphere as an absolutely unique and closed space. This manifests as an excessive focus on separation and stratification within South Africa, and the neglect of co-existing global configurations that significantly impacted on local culture (such as the Cold War). Particularly, academic studies of this period decline to situate South Africa within the broader African context. In this resistance paradigm, Nuttal and Michael (2000: 1) suggest, race is again privileged as the central determinant of identity:

Cultural theorizing in South Africa, with its emphasis on separation and segregation, has been based until recently on the following tendencies: the over-determination of the political, the inflation of resistance, and the fixation on race, or more particularly on racial supremacy and racial victimhood as a determinant of identity. The theoretical closure that comes with seeing South Africa as a closed space has resulted in seeing it as dislocated from the African continent, as not African.

In this resistance perspective, the ultimate aim of cultural activity is to further the goals of the 'struggle'. According to Nuttal and Michael, "Cultural theorists of the last few decades in SA have imagined culture-making as a form of 'cultural work' that has had an explicit moral and political agenda and was intimately concerned with the struggle against apartheid" (2000: 10). Artists on the left of the spectrum thus took pride in calling themselves 'cultural activists' or 'cultural workers' to declare their affiliation with the working classes and union activism.

The very rapid politicisation of academic art discourse was given momentum by the *State of Art* conference in Cape Town in 1979. In the introduction to the proceedings, University of

³⁴⁸ It must be noted that this shift was not abrupt or absolute - conservative modernist tendencies continued well into the '90s - De Jager's *Images of Man* (1992) and Verstraete's *Township Art: Context, Form and Meaning* (1989) come to mind.

Cape Town professor Neville Dubow declared that the aim of the conference was “to focus attention on the problems facing art production of serious and committed art in the context of South Africa in the 1970s” (1979: 1).³⁴⁹ Perhaps more than any other document, the proceedings of this conference demonstrates the awkward intermingling of the conflicting ideological paradigms that characterises white writing of this period.³⁵⁰ The degree to which liberalism and Marxism constituted uncomfortable bedfellows during the ‘struggle era’ emerges in the ideological divergence of the papers published in the conference proceedings. Younge’s ‘Dead in One’s Own Lifetime – the Contours of Art under Apartheid’ adopts a Marxist approach in which the ruling elite and the embattled black artist are dramatically clinched in a David and Goliath battle of epic proportions. Younge quotes Gramsci on hegemony and adopts a Marxist jargon in which dialectics feature prominently: “Art as theory and practice is involved in a constant process of encounters in which history is first transfigured and subsequently transformed” (1979: 45). By contrast, Peirson’s text may be regarded as an uncomfortably familiar reminder of the liberal-paternalistic approach that characterised many earlier discourses. Peirson recounts her experiences as an art teacher in black schools in such a way that the ‘rational Western mind’ and the ‘wonderfully spontaneous and irrational African mind’ are juxtaposed.

The author Nadine Gordimer’s conference address exemplifies how the two seemingly incompatible methodologies of Marxism and liberalism can coexist and even bolster one another. Her text entails a fundamentally liberal Modernist approach to creativity commingled with an Althusserian suspicion of the state. Thus she warns that “[i]nnate creativity can be falsified, trivialized, deflected, conditioned, stifled, deformed and even destroyed by the state, and the state of society it decrees” (1979: 4). Speaking (in the familiar tone of liberal paternalism) on behalf of the black artist, Gordimer proposes that: “For the black artist at this stage in his development, relevance is the supreme criterion. It is that by which his work will be judged by his own people, and they are the supreme authority since it is only through them that he can break his alienation”. Thus, she concludes, “Struggle is the state of the black collective consciousness and art is its weapon” (1979: 6). This circumscription of the black artist shares many characteristics with earlier conceptions of black creativity and subjectivity, even though Gordimer’s ‘solution’ to the ‘problem’ of black artistic alienation smacks of revolutionary subversion. The black artist is still, primarily, an alienated soul at a particular ‘stage of

³⁴⁹ At the close of the conference two resolutions were passed: the first called for access to art education for all South Africans, and the second noted that it is the responsibility of every artist to work as diligently as possible to effect change towards a post apartheid society (1979: 1).

³⁵⁰ Of the 29 speakers at the conference, only two (Adam Smal and Sipho Sepamla) were not white.

development'. He is still representative of a collective (a 'black collective consciousness'), but his salvation lies in recognising the responsibilities that this entails. Art is instrumentalised as 'a weapon', and 'struggle' as the essential condition of the proletariat. The ultimate goal of cultural struggle, Gordimer ironically proposes, is the transcendence of race and of white normative standards: "This is consistent with an abandonment of the old positions of white and black in culture and the scrapping of the assumption that white-based culture is the mean, for white as well as black" (1979: 8).

Perhaps because Modernist formalism still dominated art discourse in the '70s, several contributors to the conference assume positions against the ideological framework of this aesthetic paradigm. The art critic, Joyce Ozyński, for instance, warns that: "While 'art for art's sake' may appear to be the disinterested cry of the intelligentsia, it works in the interests of the ruling class, and complements the powerfully repressive forces of state morality" (1979: 33). This critique of Modernist formalism is used to dismiss the phenomenon of 'Township Art': "Indeed, one could say that all black painting constitutes a refined type of tourist art, since, like all tourist arts, it is art produced by a dominated indigenous people for consumption purely by a non-indigenous dominant western culture" (1979: 34). The criticism of commercialisation is driven by a revolutionary idealism that condemns the 'decadent' pursuit of financial gain and the 'irrelevant frivolity' of aesthetic concerns – but it is ironically likely that the critique of commercialism is also driven by a lingering High Modernist distaste of the 'vulgar' art market.³⁵¹ Like more conservative writers before her, Ozyński blames Western liberals for 'corrupting' black artists by demanding a thematically and stylistically uniform 'ethnic' style:

Because the distinctive ethnic identity of black painting would be threatened by the assimilation of white subject-matter and styles, it is condemned to be static and insular. For the same reason it is thematically repetitious. And it is stylistically incestuous because black artists can only draw on one another (1979: 34).

³⁵¹ This is also ironic because the overwhelming majority of 'township artists' never managed to make a living out of their art (most artists had other jobs and practised art in their free time under very unfavourable conditions), and were compelled to sell to whites because no viable art market existed in the black communities. The proscription against commercialism strikes one, under these circumstances, as unsympathetic and unrealistic. It is particularly ironic that artists were termed 'cultural workers' to demonstrate their status as members of the revolutionary proletariat – but that they were discouraged from selling their wares and skills as other blue-collar workers were encouraged to do. This proscription became so severe that some of the more politicised community arts centres (such as Alexandra arts centre) never created marketing structures for their artists, to avoid the commercialism that so 'shamefully entrapped' the previous generation.

But while Scholz's similar condemnation of a 'white liberal' influence on modern black art suggested that 'foreign' liberals encouraged 'bad art' by condescendingly patronising inferior black artists, Ozynski's critique suggests a more complex subjective dynamic at work:

Since the patrons of black artists are not the state, or big businesses, but quasi-liberal private individuals, it has been possible for black artists to incorporate feelings of pain, despair, and even rage, and to describe, often in considerable detail, conditions of poverty. Yet ultimately the black artist has to remove the sting from his story in order to render it innocuous for his audience. Poverty is made picturesque. Suffering becomes a spectacle of pitying white eyes. The self-pity of the black artist means that he sees his experience through eyes other than his own: through the eyes of whites. The artist is in an alienated and impotent position. His art complains rather than protests (1979: 35).

Nowhere were the aims of a popular or people's culture more clearly articulated than at the ANC organised CASA conference in 1987. The degree to which 'people's culture' is defined in relation to 'apartheid culture' is unmistakable in all the papers. In a message from COSATU and the UDF (Campscheur & Divendal 1989:258), for instance, apartheid culture is defined as that which "...idealizes imperialism, oppresses the mind and is leaving our creativity in chains" and it is seen to drive "the people of South Africa to obliterate fascist culture and substitute it with popular people's culture". The people's culture is "characterised by a spirit of internationalism and a humanist perspective that derives from the best of the cultural heritage of the various peoples that make up the South African population" (Campscheur & Divendal 1989:214), thus counteracting the parochialism of the government's "own affairs" policy (see also Sack in Campscheur & Divendal 1989:75). The CASA conference therefore expressly set out to counter the exclusive white conception of a national canon of South African art by promoting an actively political counter-culture, entirely constructed in ideological opposition to the dominant culture. It is interesting that the discourse adopted to persuade readers of the superiority of this culture borrows liberally from Enlightenment notions of a universal, humanist spirit shared by all cultures. Thus the quintessentially modernist humanism and universalism of neo-Marxist discourse is revealed.

One of the resolutions passed at the CASA conference raises a significant challenge to Enlightenment conceptions of subjectivity and has particular resonances in an African context steeped in Black Consciousness ideology. This resolution proposes that "...the culture of the oppressors has encouraged a high degree of individualism amongst artists", and that "cultural

workers and artists be encouraged to work and develop collectively by sharing ideas, resources and skills with a view to enriching people's culture" (Campscheur & Divendal 1989:217). This was a sentiment frequently voiced by black artists during the 'struggle era' - particularly artists influenced by the Black Consciousness Movement. The degree to which rampant individualism is regarded as an alien and divisive Western decadent force is illustrated by the following statement by Mnyele (1988:300):

Dikobe, Gavin [Younge] and Bongi [Dhlomo], like all artists today, have been taught to work too much as individuals, away from the collective. This must be resisted. The system of fragmentation, the tendency towards individualism, exclusiveness and isolation is as moribund as that of divide and rule.

In similar vein, an artist, quoted in the *Neglected Tradition* (Sack 1988:26) expresses the undesirability of artistic individualism as follows:

In the western tradition, an artist is accountable to nobody but himself as he is free to decide how and what to paint, whom to paint for, etc. By contrast the community artist paints the concerns and aspirations of the community.... Moreover, some community artists feel that the community 'owns' their work, much in the way that a mask in traditional African culture belonged in the clan.

Thus, not only are collective actions regarded as desirable in accordance with the socialist aims of the international community arts movement, but they are seen to nurture an aspect of the black cultural heritage.

Academic research conducted during the 'struggle era' tends to relocate interest from the artist/artwork to the cultural sphere as political arena. This politicisation can partly be seen as a response to the current socio-political climate, but also reflects an international proliferation of neo-Marxist cultural theories in the '70s and '80s.³⁵² In particular, it indicates the waning of liberal (formalist) Art History and the concurrent rise of a more sociological approach to culture and cultural institutions. My Master's thesis (*The Ideology and Practice of Community Arts in South Africa, with particular reference to Katlehong and Alexandra arts Centres*, 1991) constitutes a typical example of such research. The thesis consists of a comparison between two community arts centres – one as representative of government sponsored, top-down initiatives, and the other as an example of a 'true' community arts centre (i.e. one that was established

³⁵² See, for instance, Egbert (1970); Lasch (1978); Wolff (1981); Fisher (1984); Althusser (1984); Gablik (1987). A similar politicisation took place in South African writing on theatre – see Steadman (1986) and Kavanagh (1985).

and run by members of 'the community'). Although the text avoids the emotive 'struggle rhetoric' of popular publications and maintains a 'neutral' academic tone, the choice of topic, the title of the dissertation (particularly the inclusion of the term 'ideology'), and the comparison between ideologically opposed centres clearly indicate a Marxist dialectic at work. The introduction unequivocally declares that the aim of the thesis is to prove that arts centres have a vital role to play in the democratisation of the arts, and that community initiatives perform this task much more effectively than government sponsored/administered centres. The thesis includes no mention of any individual art pieces or artists and provides no discussion of any one particular member's experience of the arts centres concerned. It deals primarily with statistics, financial policies, minutes of meetings and other such (positivistic) data. Although the dire economic plight of black South Africans is frequently mentioned, the commercialism of government sponsored arts centres is implicitly criticised as 'selling-out' the ideological goals of the ideal community arts centre. Art is approached as an instrument of 'struggle'; as a conscientising medium; as a means towards political liberation and strengthened community. Government centres constitute the thesis, community arts the antithesis. The proposed synthesis is a post-revolutionary arts arena in which a democratically elected government counters the elitism and rampant individualism of 'High Culture' by allowing community arts to flourish.

Art publications of the '80s and early '90s constitute an amalgam of liberal modernist interpretation, revisionist contextualisation and Marxist resistance terminology – thus revealing the curiously interbred nature of these paradigms in '80s discourse. Most of these publications aim at a deliberate unsettling of previous interpretations of modern black art. The title of the *Neglected Tradition* (1989a), for instance, openly declares its revisionist intent. The exhibition (held at the Johannesburg Gallery) traced the development of modern black South African art from the '30s to the late '80s. Curator Steven Sack and a team of researchers unearthed representative work of generations of artists that had been relegated to virtual obscurity. The exhibition had great impact in so far as it generated much subsequent research into almost forgotten pioneers such as Mohl, Pemba and Sekoto, and it stimulated interest in the work of contemporary artists who had not had much prior exposure. The catalogue that accompanied the exhibition remains an invaluable art historical source in that it includes a bibliography of the extensive archive of articles, newspaper clippings, catalogues and biographies collected by the exhibition organisers, as well as alphabetically arranged biographies of the artists featured.

The *Neglected Tradition* catalogue departs from previous writings in significant ways. In the first instance it comprises a much more dialogic process than earlier texts. Community-based organisations, artists, and educators were consulted to garner information and to gain approval for the project. Sack's introduction to the catalogue reveals an awareness of the potential ideological pitfalls of such a project: "Does one write about black art as a separate category or does one insert it into the 'mainstream'? Should it be displayed separately or incorporated, without concern for racial categories, simply in terms of artistic categories?" (Sack 1989a: 7). These questions indicate that the very nature of the *Neglected Tradition* project presented a paradox – the systematic historic marginalisation of black art created a cultural periphery that begged retrieval and revision, yet such an exclusive restorative history could be accused of reifying the Otherness of 'black art' by perpetuating institutional and academic apartheid. To avoid perpetuating the black artistic ghetto, Sack included white artists such as Cecil Skotnes, Bill Ainslie and Eduardo Villa whose teaching and collaborative efforts demonstrably impacted on the development of black Modernism, and whose own oeuvres reveal that the influence was mutual. Thus, Sack asserts, "there are too many parallels and reciprocities for the history of black art to be seen as a separate category of art. Many connections must be drawn – towards a new history of South African art" (1989a: 7).

In many respects, *Neglected Tradition* succeeded in this aim to provide an alternative history of 20th-century black art. Contrary to earlier formalist approaches, Sack focuses on the educational, political and economic context of black art production. In the process, numerous myths perpetrated by previous writers are exploded. So, for instance, Sack deconstructs the notion of an innate cultural 'Africanness' by properly ascribing the Africanist trend in modern black art to the influence of teachers, market demands, a rising tide of black consciousness, and a general contemporary Modernist trend towards primitivism. In keeping with the dialogic impulse that motivated this exhibition, Sack's text is peppered with quotations from black artists that provide first-hand accounts of their experiences of a radically discriminatory cultural environment. Much more attention is focused on the political content/intent of the art displayed. A chapter on 'The New Generation' is introduced with a long discussion of the *State of the Art* Conference of 1979 – which constituted the first orchestrated academic revolt against the apartheid state's cultural policies. Thus Sack's own commitment to a thriving resistance culture is unambiguously declared.

The *Neglected Tradition* catalogue reflects many of the issues and polemics of the day. Sack summarises contemporary debates around the accountability of the artist, the persistence of

contentious terminologies and categories, and the role of art in 'the struggle'. A look at the endnotes reveals that he chose to avoid the problematic extant texts about contemporary black art, and that he mainly utilised texts by black artists and intellectuals, interview material specifically obtained for the exhibition, and articles from leftist journals such as *The Classic*. He also used sources from other academic disciplines – such as literary history (Tim Couzens) and history (Lulu Callinicos) – which significantly broadened the scope of his inquiry.

Although Sack uses 'alternative' sources, the catalogue remains, in tone and interpretation, a liberal modernist text. In the Romantic tradition that informs Modernist art writing, Sack reproduces the artist as a poetically estranged soul, and his art both as evidence of his unique genius and as sign of the sufferings and hardships of 'his people'. His interpretation of Shilakoe's work is a case in point:

The images of agony, loneliness and desolation are given a haunting presence through the use of etching and aquatint. This technique was ideally suited to the vision of Shilakoe, enabling him to make images grow out of or become submerged into the surroundings. The stark contrast of tonality, associated with the lino technique, could never have conveyed the same sense of mystery. Although his work carries no overt symbols of protest it is implicitly engaged in the representation of the many hardships endured by his people (1989a: 22).

Sack's reliance on previous interpretative strategies is also evidenced by his perpetuation of the 'two-worlds syndrome'. He continues describing modern black art as a hybrid of African tradition and Western modernity,³⁵³ and does not sufficiently recognise the complex exchanges involved in the urban/rural interface - particularly in his interpretations of Rorke's Drift and the 'new sculptors' (previously termed 'transitional' artists). Sack's text can therefore be regarded as a fundamentally liberal attempt at contextualist revision – an approach that continues to dominate research on historic black South African art today.

Williamson's *Resistance Art* and Younge's *Art of the South African Townships* reveal a much more pronounced tension between liberal and radical discourses, and may thus be regarded as more typical of the 'resistance paradigm'. Despite Younge and Williamson's undoubtedly sincere identification with the aims of the liberation struggle, the tone of their writing declares their liberal humanist values and intent. This tension between discourses might be considered

³⁵³ This is also evidenced in the title of his article: *'The Meeting of Southern African and Western Art Traditions'* (1989c).

inevitable, given that these texts were produced by middle-class, white English-speaking artists/academics that were trained (and probably raised) in a moderate liberal ethos.³⁵⁴ The result is an ambivalent discourse in which the fundamentally bourgeois notions of tolerant individualism and liberal humanism coexist with the militant terminologies, proscriptions, and often intolerant self-righteousness of the revolutionary agenda. This ambiguity compounds the inherent ambivalences of humanism - and of Marxist humanism in particular - as will be discussed later.

Both Younge and Williamson's books contain forewords by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, which automatically afforded these texts, in the context of the 'struggle', a measure of political credibility. The titles of these books also reveal that terminology had become a very sensitive issue by the 1980s. Williamson's *Resistance Art* deals with what was more commonly referred to at the time as 'protest art'. In the author's acknowledgements (1989: 159), Williamson credits Andries Oliphant (activist and editor of the cultural journal *Staffrider*) for suggesting the term 'resistance' for the title - presumably because it carried less passive-reactive connotations than the more familiar 'protest'.³⁵⁵ Gavin Younge titled his book *Art of the South African Townships* rather than 'Township Art'. While this distinction might seem insignificant to an outsider, it signalled, to the politically informed, a conscious distancing from the categories imposed by previous white writing. Indeed, Younge declares in his preface that "the term 'township art' is offensive to some artists and stylistically indefensible", and takes pains to inform the reader that he focuses on the townships "as a site of mobilization for the development of a 'new' South African culture" (1988: 8).

It is clear that ideological considerations prescribed the choice of artists included. While this is par for the course for Williamson's political theme, it is evident that both authors chose to include only art that articulated 'the right' political message. Thus black artists of the 'Township' generation (Dumile, Motau, Sihlali), are excluded despite the fact that they all intermittently dealt with political subjects. Significantly, however, both Younge and Williamson chose to include the 'transitional artists' - presumably because they had only relatively recently been 'discovered' and embraced as fresh alternatives to the jaded 'Township art' that saturated the market in the '70s. In Younge's case, the inclusion of Noria Mbasu and Johannes Maswanganyi

³⁵⁴ Younge and Williamson were both connected, at the time, to the University of Cape Town.

³⁵⁵ Sack (1989d) draws a similar distinction between 'protest art' and 'resistance art', and suggests that the art of the 'Township Artists' could be regarded as examples of 'protest art', while the overtly political art of the younger generation (which communicates 'between victims of oppression and the oppressor' (1989d: 58), must be termed 'resistance art' since it constitutes a statement of pride and cultural awareness inculcated by the Black Consciousness movement.

is particularly curious, since these rural village dwellers are patently not township artists. Arguably the older generation township artists that he excluded would have been more logical candidates for a book on *'Art of the South African Townships'*. It is evident that both authors carefully filtered out artists that were perceived, in 'struggle' circles, as politically unacceptable. Younge also includes, incongruously, a few random white artists such as Michelle Raubenheimer and Suzanne Louw. His choice, in this instance, is determined by the fact that Raubenheimer was the victim of state censorship (for a feminist sculpture that was judged obscene); while Louw's work deals with conspicuous political themes. These inclusions are clearly expedient – their choice determined solely by Younge's desire to make a political point. Their random and incongruous inclusion might also be read as an unconvincing attempt at non-racialism.

Younge's chapter headings inscribe his bold political approach: *'Culture within our Struggle: Township Art and Politics'*; *'The Doors of Learning: Art Training and Bantu Education'*; *'Adequate Shelter: Township Life and Art'*; and *'Sharp: The Artists and their Art'*. His terminology (the text is peppered with words like 'dispossession', 'martyrdom', 'subjugation', 'liberation', 'oppression', 'emancipation') comprises the classic language of revolution. There is no indication that the liberation struggle is anything but a monolithic, united, univocal and ultimately triumphant force. Younge thus scrupulously avoids the possibility that ideological differences might exist between, say, 'coloured' or black artists (Younge uses the term 'black' inclusively, in accordance with the political etiquette of the struggle), or between politicised black and white artists. Nor are differences sufficiently acknowledged between village traditionalists with strong ethnic affiliations (such as Noria Mbatha) and young urban activists (such as Sfiso Mkame). Ironically, the black artist is (again) reproduced as representative of a faceless collective – the collective of the oppressed masses. This, Lemaire (1998: 65) reminds us, is part and parcel of "the immoderate Humanism of Marxism": "Marxism set out to complete the enlightenment and rationalisation of history by casting the proletariat in the role of a collective subject that would form the material condition for the emancipation of all" (1998: 64). This over-politicisation of black subjectivity is abetted by over-determined and politically forced interpretations of individual artworks.³⁵⁶

³⁵⁶ Younge interprets Tommy Motswai's innocuous painting of a tea-party (where all the party-goers, including the woman bearing the tea-tray, are of indeterminate race) as social commentary on the unequal class relations between bourgeois white employer and black servant. Motswai is known for his light and anecdotal depictions of social events (weddings, graduation ceremonies, etc), and it is quite likely that the smiling woman serving the guests is in fact the hostess rather than the domestic servant. Certainly there is nothing to suggest that she is not of the same class or race than the other members of the party.

Williamson's *Resistance Art* (along with Rankin's *Images of Wood*, also of 1989), were among the first publications to focus on themes that cut across race boundaries. Gradually the rigidly observed cultural apartheid practised in earlier South African art writing made way for an attempt at a more inclusive approach. Williamson's text takes the form of discussions about individual artists that are grouped under headings that articulate different cultural activist practices: '*Roots of the Conflict*'; '*Confrontation and Resistance*'; '*Drawings on the Wall*', etc. Her discussion of individual artists entail a brief biography (with the emphasis, understandably, on artists' struggle credentials), and a descriptive account of their work. These descriptions are interspersed with statements (usually expressing political sentiments) by the artists concerned.

Williamson's discussion of resistance art proposes a typical Marxist dyadic model of conflict, in which there is one monolithic oppressive thesis, and one equally monolithic opposing antithesis. The text is written in an accessible and uncomplicated tone; the discussion simple, if not ingenuous. Williams does not provide for the possibility of different resistance strategies, does not consider the (in)effectiveness or inherent problematics of political art, and never raises the possibility that resistance might be undercut by ambivalence, or that there might be vast subjective differences between the work of white middle-class artists and the graffiti of community artists. She attempts no relativisation by undertaking no comparisons, and her interpretations are sometimes glib and overdetermined. One is left in no doubt that the stark thesis of apartheid calls for an equally stark, united and unequivocal antithesis. It is ironic, Wright (2004: 70) points out, that the dialectic method is often hailed as a movement beyond binary oppositions (synthesis), when, in fact, this method tends to reinforce hierarchical distinctions.

Both Younge and Williamson's texts are thus typical of the 'resistance paradigm'. Like the overwhelming majority of the artworks they focus on, these authors eschew nuance and subtlety in favour of unabashed didacticism. There is not the slightest suggestion that the South African political and cultural spheres might have anything but the clearest of ideological boundaries. The ambiguous interstices between ideological extremes and the ambivalences that undercut even the most radical political views are erased – and along with it the complex subjective modalities that inevitably accompany colonial oppression and post-colonial revolt. The polarisation between the 'evil apartheid state' and the 'heroic cultural worker' is absolute, and 'the struggle' is depicted as a battle to death between two opposing enemies. In this sense, these writings can be termed overtly propagandistic. Both Younge and Williamson insert themselves in their texts – not as the panoptic (but occluded) 'I' of the traditional modernist text

– but as fellow strugglers and cultural activists. The title of Younge's first chapter '*Culture within our Struggle*' clearly articulates his affiliation with the political aims of the artists concerned, and Williamson includes her own work as examples of resistance art. This deliberate self-insertion is not a postmodern reflexive positioning, but rather aims at establishing the writers' own political credibility and struggle credentials.

The moral tone, the instrumentalisation of culture and the prescriptive tendencies discussed above are perhaps even more evident in press coverage of this period. Press articles of the 1980s articulate overt criticism of the 'Township Art' generation, accusing them of catering to a white art market and thus accommodating white expectations.³⁵⁷ Previous generations of black artists are criticised for providing a distorted picture of township life in order to cater to the expectations of a white market, and accusations of commercialism and elitism are levelled against them:

Prior to 1976 a great deal of fine art which was being produced in South Africa failed to reflect the socio-political realities of this country ... Some black artists failed to fully give expression to their experiences of life in South Africa mainly because their work was only acquired and promoted within white-controlled middle class structures. Hence, in order to garner sales, much of the work of these artists consisted of non-confrontational views of township life and traditional rural scenes which would appeal to the overseas and white market (Van Tonder 1990: 27).

In stark contrast, the 'noble liberatory' aims of contemporary culture are emphasised:

Not only has much of the art which is being produced in contemporary South Africa broken out of its elitist mould by becoming more freely available to a wider audience, but by virtue of expressing a reaction to the structures of domination, it has also gained a greater relevance ... In fact, art has become one of the most crucial components of the 'culture of resistance' as was in evidence at the 1986 *Culture in Another South Africa* Conference held in Amsterdam (Van Tonder 1990: 27).

³⁵⁷ Powell's judgement of the 'township generation' as inauthentic, for instance, is predicated on the 'authenticity' of rural art: "Suddenly [due to the *Tributaries* exhibition's exposure of rural black artists] it became obvious that township styles were not only trivial but also monstrous inventions of white entrepreneurs, designed only to comfort white liberals and to make gallery owners richer" (1986a).

Culture is represented as a vital component of the liberation struggle, and cultural activism as a brief and a duty: "It is the duty of artists and cultural workers to create an awareness of the importance of art in the life of the community" (Williamson quoted in Van Tonder 1990). In the intensely polarised milieu of the '80s, artists are regarded as either for or against the apartheid state, and neutrality is derided. The cultural boycott is actively supported by 'cultural revolutionaries' within the country, and artists who transgress the boycott are roundly criticised. Significantly, this criticism entails a critique of Modernist formalism. In 'Off to repressive Chile to exhibit Art for Art's sake', for instance, Friedman and Richards (1987) berate artists who chose to participate in the Valparaiso exhibition in Chile, accusing them of putting their aesthetic concerns before political responsibility: "But freedom of expression is not freedom from responsibility. The irony of this misconception is that art, while being elevated as 'above it all', is reduced to the status of 'below it all'. The power of the visual art medium becomes vested in its powerlessness."

Press clippings of the '80s and '90s reveal significant changes in the inclusions and exclusions of the national South African art canon. White artists continue to occupy centre stage, but politically 'progressive' artists, most of them trained at the liberal English universities, increasingly displace the formalist and primitivist white artists who dominated the canon previously. Art institutions scramble to accommodate black artists,³⁵⁸ and multi-racial art shows become the norm rather than the exception. Writers now displace the focus from 'Township art' to young politicised black artists and the newly discovered 'Transitional' artists. The role of culture in the establishment of a new national identity is frequently articulated:

You engaged in the cultural empowerment of the nation. You were digging a foundation for building a nation - a South African nation ... Art is an important weapon of struggle, an assertion of national identity, an effective tool for giving people a clear sense of purpose in life, a sense of themselves as individuals and as members of the larger community (Mabe 1989).

Art is not only a vital tool in the construction of a new national imaginary, but artists also have a responsibility to help the population to understand the implications of radical social and

³⁵⁸ Carman (1988), in a report on acquisition policies of the Johannesburg National Art Gallery, points out that for 32 years after the purchase of Gerard Sekoto's *Yellow Houses*, the gallery did not acquire a single other artwork by a black artist. This flagrant neglect generated a radical reconsideration of the acquisition policies of the gallery in the political climate of the '80s: "The primary goal today is perceived as the establishment of an historic collection of black art, not only the art which until now has been found mainly in ethnographic collections. But also the urban art that was being produced at the time the South African collection was expanding from the 1930s onwards." The *Neglected Tradition* exhibition formed part of this policy of redress.

political change. In an article titled 'Art needs to help us understand change' (1990), Ndebele suggests that:

South African artists are faced with a big task which is to help people understand a new world, a world which is no longer dominated by apartheid. He observed that it is a fact of history that music lyrics, theatre and the fine arts are dominated by political themes, that is, cultural workers are motivated by the desire "to strike a blow for freedom.

This forward-looking approach indicates confidence in the inevitability of liberation. History is once again reiterated as a purposive continuum, in which the forces of justice and liberation must triumph over the evils of totalitarianism. The Zabalaza Festival that was held in London, for instance, included seminars titled 'Women in a New South Africa' and 'Towards a Post Apartheid Culture'; one of the trustees, the ANC's arts and culture co-ordinator Wally Serote, is quoted as saying that: "A new culture is emerging in South Africa. This struggle is yet to produce many writers, film-makers, photographers, artists and other cultural workers. We will develop an eye for what we are and what we are supposed to be doing here on earth" (*Celebration of a New Dawn in South Africa*, 1990).

Affiliation to other national revolutionary agendas is emphasised, thus affirming the Marxist ideal of trans-national solidarity between workers in service of an international class revolt:

The thrust is to empower 95 grassroots cultural workers with additional skills in their different disciplines through workshops, debates, discussions and exchange with cultural workers from Africa, Britain, Cuba, Nicaragua and with our own exiled artists (Junaid Ahmed cited in *Celebrating the Power of Culture*, 1990).

But the prescriptions, proscriptions and moral high ground of 'resistance' writing was not met without opposition. In an article titled '*Black Artists: We're Fed up with 'Political' Labels*' (1986), Charlene Smith suggests that, once again, resistance rhetoric boils down to white critics and academics prescribing what black artists should do. She points out that "Black artists are losing patience with the cultural apartheid that paints them into either 'political' or 'ethnic' corners of the canvas. They say they are being seriously inhibited by art buyers and critics - who tend to be white - resisting work that doesn't fall into a 'black art', 'protest art' or 'township art' category." Smith cites Bongiwe Dhlomo (artist and director of the Alexandra Art Centre):

It would appear that white South African artists aren't necessarily expected to carry the burden of apartheid in their works, or even dig into their Dutch or English colonial roots

for inspiration. But black artists, as the political situation gets fiercer, are expected to carry the banner for the liberation struggle in one hand while holding on to the goat-hide skin of their ancestral roots in the other.

Significantly, the debate again centres on a contest between liberal Modernist and Marxist perceptions of the purpose of art. Dhomo concludes that, "Now we just have to educate buyers to accept different work from us. To accept our art for art's sake and not for any political or paternalistic consideration."³⁵⁹

Likewise, an article by Powell (1987), titled *'So who wants politics on the lounge walls?'* demonstrates that the paradigm shift occurring in the art-world amounted to an ideological conflict between Modernism and Marxism:

In one of those sublime ironies of which history is capable, 'culture' has ceased to be the preserve of the ruling classes in South Africa and its ownership has been transferred into the hands of the proletariat. When one talks these days about 'culture' one is talking in relation to the political agendas of the democratic movement - about the overthrow of those traditional and Eurocentric norms which fell under the rubric of 'culture' in the old sense.

He points out that:

A new emphasis has been placed on the directedness of cultural activities inside this country, an emphasis which seems likely to amount to a struggle for the 'means of cultural production'. Now culture no longer has anything to do with art. 'Culture' has ceased to be the exclusive preserve of educated Westerners, what separates the upper from the lower classes, the colonisers from the colonised; it has become the property of the masses. And at the same time it has set itself up in opposition to 'art', which has come more and more to be associated with a basically white and definitely elitist set of practices.

The contest between High Modernism and Marxism is also discernable in the broadening of the academic field to include research on popular culture. Sack, for instance, published two articles (1989e & 1989f) on the spontaneous 'people's parks' that briefly flourished in the townships. In another article (1989g) he suggests that 'art has lost its innocence' and that the emerging culture of the new South Africa is a highly politicised popular street art. Likewise, Williamson

³⁵⁹ The irony of this statement lies in the fact that Dhomo was then director of one of the most radically leftist community arts centres in South Africa. Alexandra arts centre never marketed its members' art, for instance, since it was feared that such commercialism would taint its socialist goals.

includes in her account of 'resistance art' a wide array of popular art forms, such as T-shirts, posters and graffiti.

The positivism and instrumentality of the 'resistance paradigm' gradually made way for the more complex and subtle modalities of language and psychology as post-structuralism and post-colonialism gained a foothold in South African academe. This demise of the 'resistance paradigm' was given impetus when the influential exiled activist Albie Sachs launched a scathing attack on 'struggle art' in Stockholm and Lusaka in 1989. Sachs shocked the cultural left by systematically challenging the received notions of resistance culture. By accusing 'struggle culture' of a humourless and pedantic approach to creativity, Sachs affirmed the importance of creative freedom and play in art-making. According to Jamal (2003: 20), Sachs criticised the highly political solidarity culture of the struggle for creating "a culture of sleep-walkers, a culture distorted by a reflexive poverty and a failure to understand that creativity knows no consensus". In a statement that prophetically foresaw a future South African art obsessed with the complexities of identity, Sachs points out that 'struggle artists' forfeited the opportunity to explore the self-reflexive possibilities of the creative act: "We South Africans fight against real consciousness, apartheid consciousness, we know what we struggle against. It is there for all the world to see. But we don't know who we ourselves are. What does it mean to be South African?" (in Jamal 2003: 20). Sachs proposes that, in the new nation's struggle "to give birth to itself" we remain "trapped in the multiple ghettos of the apartheid imagination..." (1990a: 19). He therefore suggests (only partly tongue in cheek) that the slogan "culture is a weapon of the struggle" should be banned for a period of a minimum of five years (1990a: 19).

These statements by Sachs, whose credentials as 'struggle hero' was absolutely above reproach and hence not easily dismissed, generated controversies, debates, outrage, and praise that served to undermine the worst excesses of absolutism, instrumentalism and prescriptiveness of struggle rhetoric. Sachs was hailed by some as a visionary; by others as reactionary since his call for artistic freedom was interpreted as a liberal/formalist affirmation of the autonomy of art; and by yet others as proof that the liberal position was 'right' all along ³⁶⁰. Sachs' talk signalled an awareness that the 'resistance paradigm' was coming to close due to the imminence of political liberation. Indeed, the ANC's Department of Culture followed the address in Stockholm with a seminar entitled "*Preparing Ourselves for Freedom*" ,

³⁶⁰ For a look at some of these debates, see de Kok's "Spring is Rebellious" (1990), which collates some of the responses.

which, as the title suggests, looked beyond “the tight, defensive posture which had enabled us to survive the years of repression, and to enter with more openness and daring the terrain we were conquering” (Sachs 1990b: 147).

Despite the heavy-handed proselytising tone of much ‘resistance writing’, these texts managed to destabilise some of the more invidious stereotypes and presuppositions perpetrated by earlier writings. Younge’s *Art of the South African Townships*, like the *Neglected Tradition*, provided much needed historical information that assisted in situating black artistic practice within the educational, political and economic climate of apartheid South Africa.³⁶¹ But these histories are recounted as a linear process of increasing capitalist/class oppression, followed by the inevitable antithesis of a workers’ revolt. The synthesis of successful class struggle (in this case a liberated South Africa) is presented as the imminent culmination of a dialectical process. This Marxist teleology, Young (1990: 2) reminds us, is a typical modernist tale of progress in which the proletariat must ultimately succeed in overthrowing the exploitative capitalist state. This single narrative subsumes all processes of change and depends upon the existence of one, homogenous oppressor and one equally seamless oppressed - a single master and a single slave. In this sense, Younge points out, Marxism is also implicated in the Eurocentric structures of knowledge and forms of oppression of the last 200 years.

³⁶¹ This process of contextualisation was then taken further by the much more assiduous scholarship of Rankin and Miles.

CONCLUSION

One can construct an ethnography composed of dialogues. One can feature multiple voices, or a single voice. One can portray the other as a stable, essential whole, or one can show it to be the product of a narrative of discovery, in specific historical circumstance (Clifford 1988: 115).

My investigation of modernity in this thesis is largely confined to what the prism of Western cultural and anthropological writings about African art in general, and South African art writing in particular, reveals of it. If my conviction that this particular prism adequately refracts and displays a very broad spectrum of modernist thought should seem misplaced, I can only justify this confidence by reiterating that the modernist paradigm is of a particularly appropriative and encompassing nature. I propose that all discourses produced during the modern era are imbedded in a matrix of modernist thoughts and attitudes, and that no discourse produced under conditions of modernity (even discourses that critique or question modernity) escapes the all-encompassing and appropriative modernist paradigm.

That South African art discourse of the apartheid era partakes of a quintessentially modernist paradigm is therefore not a surprising revelation – it might even seem redundant and unnecessarily laborious to demonstrate that the Enlightenment project informed apartheid thinking. But when one considers that these literatures still serve as canonical sources on historic black art in South Africa, such a critical revision emerges as essential. Every time I visited the Johannesburg Art Gallery to consult the *Neglected Tradition* holdings, I encountered schoolchildren doing research on a variety of black artists for school projects. The only sources they had at their disposal were the texts deconstructed in this thesis. As long as South Africa's library shelves remain stocked with these reactionary art writings, no revised school curriculum can redress the neglect and misrepresentation of the past. While some revisionist work, as I have mentioned before, is being produced to counter the reductiveness of the Hegelian dialectic, a much more proactive attempt must be undertaken to decentre the monolithic stereotype of black subjectivity and art produced throughout decades of modernist/colonialist writing.

It is often suggested that South African cultural discourse should shed its chronotypic obsession in favour of studies that cut across demarcations of race. Such studies potentially have much to offer, as long as they do not deny race as a major determining factor (historically and

currently) in South African art production. One such largely unexamined topic is primitivism, which, in South Africa, is a complex field richly saturated with race and culture discourses³⁶². Another is the role of visual culture in the formation of successive (and often coterminous but conflicting) national imaginaries. The processes of inclusion and exclusion that accompany the construction of various national bodies manifest as a fascinatingly intricate language in visual culture – too few studies have been undertaken to determine how visual representations of race (in conjunction with gender and class) historically underwrote various national imaginaries in South Africa³⁶³. There is therefore much to be said for nuanced explorations of issues that traverse race boundaries, yet necessitate a close reading of race. But complete non-racialism must be regarded, at this moment in South Africa's history, as a potentially dangerous pipe-dream. To elide race would amount to an act of wilful amnesia and would entail, once again, the occlusion of individual artists' particular experiences. Race-blindness would moreover imply a level playing-field where none existed, which could have a detrimental effect on the evaluation of individual artists' oeuvres.

It is imperative that race be dealt with boldly and fearlessly, even at the risk of opening old wounds. The canon of a 'national' South African art has never been systematically exposed as an act of radical exclusion – the whiteness of previous (and current!) canons thus need to be thoroughly acknowledged and unpacked. Vuyile Voyia and Julie McGee's controversial documentary film *The Luggage is Still Labelled* (2003) constitutes one attempt to expose the sustained white-centeredness of the contemporary South African art scene. This documentary, and the critical response it elicited, reveals the extent to which bitter racial polarisation remains part of South Africa's cultural climate.³⁶⁴ I believe that this polarisation, which mirrors an escalating national and global tension, can only be addressed by the systematic and relentless deconstruction of past race discourses. To do this, race must no longer be investigated as a significant modality only in relation to black artists – more work needs to be

³⁶² A Masters thesis (Nettleton 1973) dealt with the term 'primitive' in relation to African sculpture – but, as far as I know, no studies have been undertaken to explore how primitivism manifested in modern South African art. In particular, primitivism needs to be unpacked as a particularly complex phenomenon in the art of black Modernists.

³⁶³ Van der Watt has written numerous articles (based on her Master's thesis) that deal with race as signifier in Afrikaner Nationalist art, but there is much scope for work on visual culture in African nationalism in South Africa.

³⁶⁴ Pissaro (2004), to my mind justifiably, feels that the documentary perpetuates a reading of 'whiteness' and 'blackness' as oppositional forces, and accuses the authors of essentialising racial identities. However, Voyiia and McGee's charge that the art arena remains overwhelmingly in the control of white academics and critics cannot be disputed and must be heeded. It is a pity that *The Luggage is Still Labelled* declines to consider the numerous economic, historic and cultural factors that contribute towards this continuing white dominance and never proposes solutions to this situation. Nor, I feel, does it acknowledge numerous attempts by the same white academics and institutions it attacks, to redress this historical inequity. In that regard, this documentary missed an opportunity to make a constructive contribution to the cultural debate.

done to explore whiteness as a major determining factor in South African visual culture³⁶⁵. Such studies should not only be undertaken in relation to contemporary artists who self-reflexively explore white identity, but can also be applied retroactively to South Africa's iconic artists who perhaps never thought of their art as significantly 'white'- Battiss, Stern, Pierneef, Van Wouw and Preller come to mind as particularly interesting artists to deconstruct as bearers/performers of whiteness.

One strategy for overcoming the chronotypic categories of the past is to make a sustained effort to research individual artists in depth, so that the endemic tendency to view black artists as faceless representatives of a collective can be undone once and for all. While much of worth is being published on up and coming black artists, there is still much scope for detailed research on modern artists of earlier generations – the very artists so systematically misrepresented in the literatures deconstructed in this thesis. The appearance of increasingly more monographs and solo exhibitions/retrospectives of historic black artists' work constitute a step in this direction, but most of these monographs and catalogues are written in a Modernist/liberal mode that eschews an interrogation of the numerous (often conflicting) discourses that shaped the modern black artist's voice. Yet these monographs are valuable in so far as they provide us with detailed biographies of the artists concerned, and are replete with potentially useful information for a thoroughly contextualised reconsideration of these artists' oeuvres. They constitute, therefore, groundwork for future studies that will hopefully undertake a more complex and thickly descriptive account of the historical position of the modern black artist in South Africa. Monographs that, to my mind, succeed in unpacking some of the complexities of subjectivity and modernity in the work of previously misrepresented 20th century black artists include Colin Richards' work on Tito Zungu (1997a) and Durant Sihlali (1997b); an article on Bongi Dhlomo by Jacqui Nolte (2000); and articles on Trevor Makhoba (2001) and Gerard Bhengu (1997) by Juliette Leeb-du Toit.

To achieve a thorough rewriting of past discourses, more interdisciplinary research needs to be undertaken. As long as a narrow art historical method is continued, the investigation of modern black art will remain a tedious tracing of stylistic and educational influences or the production of anodyne biographical sketches. The individual black artist will continue to be produced as the High Modernist genius driven by the will to create, or the estranged and alienated ghost hovering between incompatible cultural life-worlds. Even worse, the black artist will continue to

³⁶⁵ Liese van der Watt, an art historian at UCT, is currently engaged in incisive studies of whiteness in contemporary South African art. See van der Watt (2001; 2003; 2004).

be read as the bearer, in a Hegelian sense, of Africa's 'culture-soul'. Barthes reminds us, however, that: "In order to do interdisciplinary work, it is not enough to take a 'subject' (a theme) and to arrange two or three sciences around it. Interdisciplinary study consists in creating a new object, which belongs to no-one" (in Mirzoeff 1999: 4).

Postcolonial investigations of the black subject's complex and ambivalent survival strategies and counter-statements would contribute significantly towards a more subtle reading of black visual culture. Whereas postcolonial critical investigations have contributed substantially towards a layered decoding of the colonial and postcolonial discourses of the East, Africa is in dire need of a similar, politically motivated and systematic re-reading of its historic and contemporary cultural texts. Psychoanalytic theory might provide useful tools to unpeel the multi-layered and immensely complex subjective modalities that accompany systematic oppression. This would include not only the modern African's ambivalent blend of compliance and resistance, but would also entail a thorough investigation of the dominant white subject – and the anxieties and insecurities generated by the menacing presence of the aspirant black Modernist. The philanthropy or missionary zeal of the white teacher, and the (in)dependence, compliance and rebelliousness of the black pupil, likewise deserve bold psychoanalytic scrutiny. To perceive race as a discursive construct is to recognise that the individual is not only subjectified (and objectified) by dominant race discourses and the institutions they generate, but that she/he also participates in the active construction of his/her own racialisation. This Foucaultian sense of the subject – as simultaneously subjected (by surrounding discourses and institutions) and actively self-subjectifying (by internalising his/her socialisation and by practising constant self-surveillance) – will tolerate no essentialising conception of collective subjectivities. In addition, a cultural studies approach to the subject – which allows for considerable individual agency and that perceives cultural praxis as a potential form of self-empowerment – could contribute a reading of the black subject as actively engaged in the production of counter-cultures and counter-discourses, rather than the passive victim of surrounding racist texts and practices. In this understanding of culture, the artwork is one way for the black to assert subjectivity by claiming logos and speech. To undertake such an investigation, the singularity of each and every black artist's own complex construction of subjectivity (in which his/her art no doubt plays a constitutive role) must be taken into consideration.

More than anything, dialogue is called for. The modernist self's monotonous and self-flattering monologue must make way for an intensive dialogic process. Buried voices must be unearthed,

subtexts excavated, diaries consulted, contemporary newspapers sourced and interviews held. The sheer academic sloppiness; flagrant and indiscriminate borrowings; factual inaccuracies; and sweeping, arrogant statements of the literatures of the past must be subverted by contextualist readings that acknowledge complexity and contingency; and above all, that recognise the singularity of each person, event and moment under scrutiny. Such dialogic readings of the past (and the present) will rewrite modernity and its hybrid offspring, Modernist culture, as multiple, multivocal, fragmented and diverse. It will prevent the hegemonic assumption that modernity and Modernism are European inventions and Western preserves, and that all non-Western manifestations of these phenomena are therefore by implication peripheral. Decentring can only take place once the notion of the West as universal centre is finally dislodged. Until the various manifestations of cultural modernity in South Africa are allowed their own centres, they will continue to be reduced to shadowy adjuncts or minor replicas of a master culture.

There are numerous art historians, curators and critics (local and international), that are in the process of unsettling Western centrality by critically unpacking contemporary African art and its reception in the West. In particular, a number of highly eloquent, historically aware and critical diasporic Africans have taken upon themselves the task of deconstructing the Western reception of modern African art. Writers such as Salah Hassan, Olu Oguibe, Okui Enwezor, and Sylvester Ogbegie are not only intent on unpacking the ethnocentric projections that inform Western approaches to modern African art, but (in the case of Hassan and Enwezor), have taken upon themselves the task of representing African art to the Western metropole by curating exhibitions that counter the most damaging and enduring of these preconceptions. As diasporans, these curators are ideally positioned to 'read' the singularity of African cultures³⁶⁶. Most of these critics act as interlocutors for contemporary, up and coming African and diasporic artists, but some of them are also actively rewriting the history of early modern African art. Oguibe's writings on the early Nigerian Modernists, for instance, constitute precisely the kind of nuanced, complex and determinedly political re-inscription that is needed to actively subvert past writings on African culture. Hassan and Enwezor's exhibitions and writings on contemporary African artists expressly aim to unsettle the West's narcissistic love-affair with 'primitive' Africa. The purpose of these exhibitions is to counter the "western demand for difference and exoticism" which "...deliberately [bypasses] the most proven

³⁶⁶ 'Singularity' is described by Agamden (in Grossberg: 1996:103) as "a mode of existence which is neither universal ... nor particular".

African artists in international art arenas in favour of the kitsch, crude and naïve products of the roadside painters who crowd the markets of African metropolises..." (Hassan 1999: 218)³⁶⁷. While these curators/critics' sophisticated counter-exhibitions succeed in raising the profile of cutting edge, Avant Garde diasporan and African artists whose "...ineluctable presence disturbs, disrupts and problematises the postcolonial border..." (Enwezor 1990b: 245), they tend to overlook, if not dismiss, the overwhelming majority of untutored artists in Africa. The reluctance of African curators to reify Western preconceptions has thus arguably led to an unfortunate overreaction. In their attempt to dislodge a Western hegemonic reading of Africans and African culture (as naïve/primitive/atavistic), it can be argued that these curators remain caught in the loop of reaction. The result is, ironically, that the work of the overwhelming majority of African cultural practitioners is overlooked, and the Western elitist concept of Avant Garde and High Art ironically reified. This tendency of African curators to avoid the informal art of Africa was recently overcome, however, by the curator Simon Njami, whose exhibition *Africa Remix* (2005) traversed the boundaries of popular and 'high' art with such impunity that the exhibition elicited a shocked reaction from some reviewers.

The multiple cultural modernities and overlapping rural and urban cultural centres of Southern Africa are also currently being explored by a number of South African researchers. The alternative, enormously rich and largely untapped field of 'informal' art production in Africa, most frequently treated as exotic curiosities in tourist literatures, are now being unpacked and problematised as more than a quaint mishmash of African tradition and Western modernity. Recent publications such as Nettleton, Rankin-Smith and Charlton's *Engaging Modernities* (2004) interpret the material culture of Africa as statements of belonging to the modern world: the modern, not as alien, Western other, but as integral part of countless millions' life experience. Likewise, art historians such as Sandra Klopper and Juliette Leeb-du Toit use the critical methods of cultural studies to investigate contemporary and historical Southern African dress, fabrics, fashion and cultural practices as instances of syncretic and complex modernity. Much work, however, still needs to be done in this field, and it is hoped that more African researchers (of the intellectual ilk of Enwezor and Hassan) will undertake studies that cut across the class distinctions implicit in the 'high' art/popular art divide.

³⁶⁷ Enwezor (1990a: 24) interprets the West's love-affair with untutored African art as follows: "The perverted desire for the pornographic manifests itself most significantly...in the continued preference in the West for that art from Africa that is easily imagined not as art as we know it, but as a sign of the occult, an inscription of the fantastic. The childlike paintings of the Beninois, Cyprien Toukoudagba would not ordinarily represent great creative talent in the West, and would not, conventionally, qualify as art beyond the sixth grade".

To further unsettle the pervasive modernity/tradition dialectic, Bhabha's concept of a third space – a space that is more than the sum of its parts – can be usefully employed.³⁶⁸ Rather than a hybrid anachronism that straddles two incommensurable worlds, African modernity must be investigated as a syncretic and distinct space (as all modern cultural spaces are syncretic and distinct) in which 'ingredients' that might have their origins in one or the other continent are transformed into something discrete and singular.³⁶⁹ In this singular cultural space, cross-cultural infusion is seldom the result of passive influence, but rather a form of cultural appropriation where the appropriated form has a symbolic value that needs to be assessed. Although the resultant interweaving of cultural elements may look to a first-world eye like a quaint mass of contradictions, they are whole and logical to the accustomed third space inhabitant and creator.

Above all, the irreducible complexity of culture needs to be recognised and written. Perhaps because art history largely failed to meet this challenge, it is rapidly being superseded by visual studies and cultural studies at South African universities. While this is in many respects a positive development, these disciplines tend to focus on contemporary popular media and thus do not undertake the historical rewriting that this country desperately needs. In a sense, art historians have to overcome the ontological roots of their discipline before they can meaningfully rewrite South Africa's cultural heritage. Part of this overcoming means to transcend the notion that art history deals exclusively with 'Art'. Despite much postmodern mouthing to the effect that there are no boundaries to respect and no 'real' distinction between High Art and popular culture, boundaries and distinctions are thriving in South African art writing – perhaps thriving now more than ever in the hothouse climate of self-congratulatory 'multiculturalism' that characterises the contemporary South African cultural scene. The appropriation of popular culture and vernacular art-forms for pithy statements by the High Art establishment is not, to my mind, cultural democracy. Art historians ironically need to relinquish their obsession with art before the historic (and contemporary) artwork can be significantly reinterpreted. The history of 20th-century black art can only be meaningfully rewritten as part of a much more encompassing South African culture – which includes newspapers,

³⁶⁸ Bhabha (1995a: 208) proposes that cultures are not sufficient unto themselves. Cultures cannot be pure isolates because of the very nature of symbolic representation.

³⁶⁹ Hountondji articulates the hybridity and singularity of African culture as follows: "Pluralism does not come from any society from outside but is inherent in every society. The alleged acculturation, the alleged 'encounter' of African civilization with European civilization, is really just another mutation produced within African civilization, the successor to many earlier ones about which our knowledge is very incomplete, and, no doubt, the precursor of many future mutations, which may be more radical still. The decisive encounter is not between Africa as a whole and Europe as a whole: it is the continuing encounter between Africa and itself" (1983: 165)

advertisements, magazines, film, music, theatre and literature. In this sense, art historians have much to learn from their colleagues in cultural studies.

Furthermore, we need to critically interrogate a disturbing academic trend to focus exclusively on the present (this applies to art history as well as cultural studies). This obsession with the present forms part of a dangerous global amnesia – it is modernity's preoccupation with the 'now' taken to its ultimate extreme. A critical reading of past discourses is essential to help us recognise the persistence of harmful textual traces in the current socio-cultural milieu. Such a critical reading must entail, above all, a retroactive dismantling of the tradition/modernity dialectic. It is arguable that this dialectic has supported the relentless Otherisation of black South African artists more than any other binary. While much has been done to dispel the myth of African traditions as rigid, archaic and immutable, the notion of modernity needs to undergo a similar re-evaluation. A recent edition of the critical post-colonial journal, *Third Text*, (Vol 19, issue 4) was devoted in its entirety to this vexing dialectic. Authors such as Hassan, Araeen and Oguibe stress that modernity must be recognised as something that is produced in Africa as well as the West. Until such recognition occurs, modernity will continue to be regarded as an alien force that is either imposed on, or expediently adopted by the African artist. Tradition and modernity must thus be re-imagined as a continuum rather than a break – a continuum, moreover, that is not imagined as the gradual transmutation of one into the other, but as a web of constant exchange and cross-infusion that manifests as a rich broth in which empowerment and dispossession are hardly distinguishable from one another. This continuum, if scrutinised closely enough, will eventually render tradition and modernity the same, so that the dialectic can, once and for all, be dispensed with to make way for a nuanced and always-already complex present.

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