

**RURAL AFRICAN PERCEPTIONS OF THE CONTEMPORARY METROPOLIS**

by

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## Declaration

I declare that “Rural African perceptions of the contemporary metropolis” is my own work and that all the sources which I have consulted or quoted have been fully acknowledged.

.....

Louis Raymond Kayanja

.....day of.....2009

## **SUMMARY**

### **Title:**

Rural African perceptions of the contemporary metropolis

### **Summary:**

This dissertation focuses on utopian versus dystopian perceptions of rural indigenous African societies with regard to the modern metropolis. Since the evolution of the modern metropolis, rural African societies have undergone significant and complex cultural changes that have dislodged rural cultures from being perceived in terms of the traditional notion of fixity. This has led to the modern city being seen as either utopian or dystopian by rural African societies. The dissertation questions the “utopianess” of the modern metropolis with a special focus on its central idea of “progress”. Special attention is given to artists who explore this cultural phenomenon in the utopian–dystopian paradigm. The dissertation goes further to address the cultural impact of recent technological developments on rural and urban societies, the researcher’s perceptions of this impact and how this has contributed to the dynamics that characterise the cultures of contemporary rural and urban migrants.

### **Key Terms:**

- **African perceptions**
- **The contemporary metropolis**
- **Utopian/dystopian perceptions**
- **Multiculturalism**
- **Contemporary technology and art expression**
- **Rural cultures versus urban cultures**
- **Migration and movement of artists**
- **Urban-rural invasion**
- **Rural-urban migration**
- **Impact of technology on rural and urban cultures**
- **Capitalism and marketing strategies**

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## PREFACE

One of the major problems that indigenous Africans of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have faced and are still facing is how to reconcile their duty and desire to uphold African traditional cultural values with their irresistible impulse to adopt modern Western cultural ideals. This cultural clash of interests manifests itself in various forms of cultural conflicts which all derive from what, over time, can be described as changing rural African perceptions of the city or contemporary metropolis.

The modern city (through its advanced architectural forms, sophisticated technology, ordered spatial layout, advanced tools of cultural production and alluring socio-cultural forms) reaches out to rural tribal communities and ferments utopian perceptions of the city as a liberating paradise. Through the migration of people and the movement of cultural products, the rural in turn invades the city because of prospects of a better livelihood and progress. The result is a series of conflicting and cross-cultural interactive processes that find expression in the breakdown of traditional fixed categories and generate individuality and multiculturalism. This works in favour of capitalism and becomes an obstacle to unitary “progress”. The city assumes a paradoxical utopian/dystopian character. In consequence, culture in the indigenous African context becomes a very unstable phenomenon, riding on the metropolitan crest of dynamic materialist cultural influences; rocking between the interstitial polarities of the traditional and the modern, the spiritual and the technological, the real and the non-real , and utopian and dystopian paradigms.

Thus the clash between traditional cultural values and Western modernist values is manifested in the evolution of the contemporary metropolis that, on one hand, has been to the advantage of individual members of different ethnic African communities and, on the other and, has been to the detriment of the underprivileged masses. Rural communality has been and is continuing to be eroded by subjectivity and individuality, leaving the only option of homogeneity to a subscription to membership of “consumer culture”. Because of this, African cultures have undergone destabilisation and uncertainties that have led to fragmentation and instability in African goals towards unitary progress.

As an academic, a scholar and an artist, the researcher has taken this phenomenon and its serious socio-cultural implications as a point of departure for his research. He realises that the cultural tension between rural and urban societies has its root in the paradoxical nature of rural Africans' perceptions of the contemporary metropolis. These perceptions manifest either as utopian or dystopian: African people have come to idealise the metropolis through movement and migration, only for them to come to realisation that their dreams can never become a reality. The cultural implications of this are manifested through cultural instability as Africans, in their desperation continue to subscribe to their traditional values while at the same time endorsing Western cultural forms and products that characterise the contemporary metropolis.

The degree to which rural Africans have succumbed to the notion of “progress” which they perceive as an improvement of quality of life through consistently adopting new Western ways and acquiring new Western products has not only resulted in the creation of new urban African cultures with utopian/dystopian perceptions but has also had an adverse effect on rural African cultures.

Against this background, the researcher explores the position of Black artists – those who come from the rural areas and migrate to the cities and those who are “born” in the cities in terms of their perceptions. It became increasingly clear from his research that these artists have a utopian or dystopian orientation. Tommy Motswai and Bodys Isek Kingelez are examples of utopian artists, while Daniel Mosako, Santu Mofokeng and Moshekwa Langa are more inclined to dystopian views.

The researcher also explores (as part of the changing urban phenomenon) recent technological developments, their infiltration into the rural areas, and the social and visual cultural implications of this infiltration from a rural utopian/dystopian point of view. Although this technology has improved the quality of life of both rural and urbanised Africans considerably, its adverse effects on both societies cannot be ignored.

It has made it difficult to sustain traditional cultural programmes that are directed towards unitary social progress.

The researcher supports the idea that we create contemporary culture and that culture creates us. This is irrespective of whether we are based in a rural or urban area. The question is whether the new culture is directed towards unitary social progress because as long as we allow culture to direct us, we will have little control over it. The best that we can do is to formulate our vision of a utopian dream that can act as a motive for us to forge ahead. Although utopia is an impossibility, it is nevertheless worthy of exploration.

In preparing this dissertation, the researcher had to rely on various research sources, selected artists and their art works – all of whom he owes his gratitude to for their valuable contributions. However, his special thanks and gratitude go to his supervisor (Mr JP van der Watt) and to Miss A Krajewska, for their valuable criticism, guidance and advice. He also extends thanks to the lecturing staff of the Department of Art History, Visual Art and Musicology at the University of South Africa for their criticism and valuable recommendations during the annual seminars.

He would also like to thank his family for their patience, Mrs V Shuku (Head of the Masithembe Beadwork Project) for her co-operation, and the elders of Cala for their valuable contributions and assistance.

Last but not least, he would like to express his appreciation to the University of South Africa for awarding him two postgraduate merit bursaries and the Robin Aldwinckle Merit Bursary. He also acknowledges the financial assistance which he received from the National Arts Council of South Africa towards the costs of this research.

When reading this dissertation, the reader should not seek answers to the issues that are raised but should rather acknowledge the urgent need for resolving these issues and join the author in searching for viable solutions.

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## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines indigenous African societies' utopian and dystopian perceptions of the contemporary metropolis. The focus of this study is the alluring effect of the metropolitan phenomenon that manifests in changes in lifestyle, migration and movement of rural Black communities to urban centres. This movement results in cross-cultural interactive processes that lead to multiculturalism. The purpose of this study is to show the paradoxical nature of utopian/dystopian perceptions and how its resultant multiculturalism is both in favour of and detrimental to unitary progress. In this respect the study draws not only on theories and discourses that deal with the utopian/dystopian aspects of the metropolis, but also explores artists whose works show an inclination towards this cultural phenomenon. The discussion on artworks of selected artists serves to reflect the subjective viewpoints of the artists on the matter.

Although much of this study is based on theories, discourses and visual culture, some field research that examines the perceptions of the Xhosa inhabitants of the remote rural area of Cala which is situated in the former homeland of Transkei in South Africa is used. There are two reasons why this area was chosen: (1) its history forms part of the history of the broader region of the Xhosa which, viewed in the context of Mayer's research (1980), sheds light on the origins and course of development of African utopian and dystopian perceptions of modernist culture and (2) it is used as a source of rural imagery that is intended to serve as a point of departure for the author's practical work. Selected visual aspects from Cala are used to consider and contextualise the paradoxical nature of the perceptions of contemporary Black rural and urban inhabitants of modern cities.

The study traces the historical background of the origins and development of African rural utopian/dystopian perceptions of the metropolis during the modernist period. This historical background, viewed against recent postmodern metropolitan technological developments, serves as a basis on which issues about these perceptions that are

expressed in contemporary artists' migration, movement and art works are investigated. The very notion of the metropolis as a utopia becomes a focal area of investigation.

This study argues that the origin of African interest in White civilisation was essentially grounded in the colonial introduction and evolution of Western cities on the African continent. Prior to the evolution of the Western city, the overwhelming part of the continent was occupied by indigenous Black peoples who were fundamentally rural and culturally slow to change. Hart (1931) as cited in Ziegler (1942:17) observes that any change which will make a mode of behaviour that seems desirable easier will generate enthusiasm. The evolution of the Western city in the rural tribal societies had a significant influence in the development of modernist utopian/dystopian perceptions of the city (later the metropolis). The city's utopian image was painted by the unprecedented and alluringly overwhelming urban layout, the sophisticated architectural styles, the cultural tools of production, and the socio-cultural life that it offered. All of this epitomised progress, which in turn sparked off unprecedented rural–urban migration and displacement.

From a visual-cultural point of view, the metropolis had two significant impacts of acculturation on tribal culture. Firstly, it appropriated many pre-modern art forms, divesting them of their tribal functional role by influencing artists to trade them as commodities. Secondly, it attracted rural Black artists who had acquired training in Western forms of art making to migrate to cities with utopian hopes of pursuing successfully rewarding careers. The urbanisation that followed is testimony to the utopian spirit that characterised the modernist period (Blazwick 2001:8). The cultural implications of this urbanisation are dealt with extensively in chapters 1 and 2 of this study.

Mourby (2003:16) observes that “dystopia and utopia are symbiotically linked”. Pessimism arose that not only stemmed from disillusionment with the civilising mission but also from a widespread fear of degeneration of traditional culture in European high culture (Hahn in Bingaman, Sanders & Zorach 2002). The disruptive effect of the utopian

invasion not only raised pessimistic concerns in the minds of some rural tribal sceptics but also resulted in disillusionment of the migrants as they found themselves culturally fragmented to become victims of capitalist exploitation. With cultural fragmentation, the pursuit of the utopian ideal of unitary progress becomes self-defeating. The utopian city becomes dystopian. Reflections on this dystopian mode are dealt with in chapter 3 of this study.

In the African context, although the utopian spirit regarding the metropolis predominantly characterised the early and mid-part of modernism, dystopia is very much part of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century mindset (Mourby 2003). With modernism waning, the dawn of postmodernism has ushered in a new technological era – the digital era that has revolutionised the physical, spatial and social configuration of the metropolis. The sophistication of this new technology is such that it defies Cartesian logic, refusing submission of the urban metropolitan geographical space to the cartographer's conglomerated architectural parameters. In terms of socio-cultural interaction, this new technology has levelled what used to be a predominantly one-way rural urban invasion to a two-way interactive process: rural–urban migration and techno-metropolitan rural invasion (Rutsky 1999:1; Robins & Webster 1999:1).

Central to this new technology is the aspect of the computer which facilitates and aids the high-speed exchange of information, goods and services – thereby facilitating, at will, the blending of the physical aspect of the rural area with a contextual confluence of global metropolitan centres. This results in a series of complex, continuous processes of decentring and assemblage of both traditional and modern forms while at the same time blending them into homogeneity of consumer culture. The notion of culture remains in a state of flux as it oscillates between facets of conflicting categories that render it impossible to conveniently define the desired ideal notion of progress.

It is at this juncture (from a rural perceptual point of view) that we begin to question the notion of *utopia* as a (metropolitan) “place/non-place” and the *dystopia* that is inextricably linked to it. The notions of *utopia* and *dystopia* becomes fragmented and

unstable, increasing the rate of flux-interplay that is expressed in Black Africans' submission to the new technology while at the same time not letting go of the traditionally tribal. The traditional visual culture whose pre-modern essence had (like the modernist technology) been predominantly conceived in terms of its instrumental function finds favour with the postmodern high-tech whose essence can no longer be defined in terms of its instrumentality or function but much rather as a matter of representation of aesthetics of style (Rutsky 1999:4). Issues regarding the paradoxical interplay of the relevant notions are dealt with extensively in chapter 4 of this study.

## **DEFINITIONS**

Although the distinction between “rural” and “metropolis” from a visual perspective seems a reality, in light of the foregoing it becomes contextually problematic. From a utopian/dystopian perspective, in many respects the urban resides within the rural in as much as the rural resides in the urban. Hence the question of rural perceptions of the metropolis becomes a worthwhile area of investigation because these perceptions cease to be viewed from a physical spatial delineation of rural versus urban geographical spaces; they become discernible from behavioural aspects of cultural expression irrespective of the spaces (rural or urban) that are occupied by those who express them. However, in order to avoid confusion, relevant seminal concepts that are used have to be defined. For the purposes of this research, the following defined terminologies (work definitions) are used.

### **“Rural” and “metropolis”**

The term “rural” refers to a remote area in the African countryside that is characterised by poverty, unemployment and outward migration of youth (McNamara 1975: iv); where an overwhelming majority of the people are engaged in agriculture and allied occupations (Singh 1986:18) but a good number of them are also acquainted with the cultural traits of contemporary metropolitan lifestyles.

While defining a “rural area” is burdened with all sorts of physical, social, economic and cultural complexities, the “metropolis” – in spite of the continuing technological developments that are transforming its configuration – has more or less gained a widely and commonly acknowledged definition: According to the *South African Oxford pocket dictionary* (Thompson 1994:517), the word “metropolis” is coined from two ancient Greek words (*mētēr* meaning “mother” and *polis* meaning “city”). In the dictionary the word is interpreted to mean “mother city” but according to Swanevelder, Van Huyssteen and Kotze (1994:312) and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1977), the term means a central city together with its outlying “ring” of dependent urbanised areas. In the African context, the term “city” is loosely used to refer both to the metropolis and the city. For the purposes of this study, the terms are used synonymously since both urban centres are loosely referred to as “utopias” (Enwezor in Mulcaire 1996:54). However, use of the terms is in certain respects also extended to contextually refer to the growing socio-economic metropolitan confluence of high-tech culture that is prevalent in the rural landscape. At this point, it is necessary to explain what is meant by “utopia” and “dystopia” and in what respects the contemporary city can perceptibly be viewed as utopian or dystopian.

### **“Utopia” and “dystopia”**

“Utopia” is difficult to define, and so too is its antonym “dystopia”. The difficulty arises from the elision that stems from Thomas More’s book *Utopia* (first published in Latin in 1516). More coins the two terms as “eu-topia” – the good place with “ou-topia” to come up with the term “utopia”. From a historical, religious and cultural perspective, the utopian phenomenon has a long relationship with the “city” – which has subjected the term to various definitions, depending on the place, society, culture, time and context in which it was used. An in-depth background overview of the phenomenon is dealt with in chapter 1 of this study. For the purposes of this dissertation, Levitas’s (1990) definition is used to the effect that “utopia” is the expression of desire for a better way of being. This includes both the objective, institutional approach to utopia and the subjective experiential concern of disalienation [sic]. It reminds us that irrespective of what we think

of a particular utopia, we learn a lot about the experiences of living under any set of conditions by reflecting on the desires which those conditions generate and yet leave unfulfilled (Levitas 1990:8). “Utopia” can therefore be interpreted as a response, in particular to anxieties and pessimistic perspectives and the unsatisfied hopes and dreams of people. This response reveals the imperfection and inadequacy of the existing status quo (in this case in the rural area) through a longing for a romanticised “ideal” (the city) (Todd & Wheeler 1978:7).

Given the above definition, “dystopia” should not be defined in the narrow restrictive sense that many contemporary theorists adopt in their discourses on the subject: that of pessimism associated with the threat of the new technological developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Baker-Smith and Barefoot (1987:2) define “dystopia” as a state of anxiety and pessimism where looming and threatening changes in society can be discerned with certainty, though without any truly hopeful solution. This definition is problematic in the sense that a “solution” must instil “hope” in order for it to be a solution and “dystopia” cannot, within the broader understanding of the concept, be limited to hopeless situations. Kumar (1987) observes the possibility of a solution by stating that “dystopia” (or anti-utopia) represents the fear of what the future might hold if we do not act to avert catastrophe. For the purposes of this study, both definitions are blended to define “dystopia” as a state of anxiety, fear and/or pessimism where looming and threatening changes in society can be discerned with certainty if no action is taken to avert catastrophe.

The utopian aspect of the metropolis is manifested in the role that science and technology play in creating alluring architectural styles, technologically attractive and stylised and/or aesthetically sophisticated consumer products, and the social-pseudo high lifestyle that goes with the seemingly exciting city throb. The utopian phenomenon has a “male–female” manifestation that has suffered patriarchal stereotyping over the centuries up to the waning of the modernist period. This subject is not dealt with in this study because it constitutes a comprehensive area of investigation that should be dealt with independently. It has also been subjected to critical discourses from diverse feminist schools of thought

and might no longer be worthy of investigation. In dealing with the utopian/dystopian phenomenon, this study only addresses perceptual issues that affect the Black people of Cala; however, these issues are framed within the broader South African and African context in order to analyse its socio-cultural implications for the future of African rural folk cultures in general. This study examines how the phenomenon is manifested in the urbanisation of rural cultures, migration from rural areas and in the artworks of selected artists (namely Tommy Motswai, Bodys Kingelez, Daniel Mosako, Santu Mofokeng and Moshekwa Langa).

### **“Multiculturalism”**

According to Collins (1989:2), “multiculturalism” is a condition where culture is no longer a fixed category but a continuous process of decentring and assemblage of conflicting voices and institutions. It is characterised by fragmentation and a reassembling of conflicting cultural facets into unstable complex wholes that remain in a state of flux. The notion of fragmentation itself refers to the awareness that knowledge is partial and relative and that the world can only be understood in fragments, thus by reconstructing different pieces. It is directly linked to eclecticism: a postmodern practice of borrowing and mixing ideas and images (a method adopted in this dissertation and in the researcher's practical work).

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FOR PRACTICAL WORK**

The research methodology for the practical work of this research was directly linked to the intended methodology for the theoretical component and drew from peoples’ views and the researcher's personal observations, experiences of the rural versus the city, and perceptions of the contemporary metropolis. The method involved the construction of architectural models that represent a personal visualisation of what the researcher perceives to be a utopian city. Selected views of the different models were photographed and the models were broken down and reassembled in different forms which were subjected to repetition of the photographic process. The photographs that were taken

were complemented with field research photographs of rural scenes. By using computer mediated technology, selections from different photographs were then digitally manipulated and used as a point of departure to make art works on the topic at hand. The art works comprise two-dimensional photographic images. The detailed discussion on the intrinsic work methodology and theoretical substantiation of the works appear in chapter 4.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FOR THE THEORETICAL COMPONENT**

No single school of thought could provide a suitable pre-packaged methodology for this research. The aims of this study and the subsequent practical component required drawing on material from different areas and sources. Since this study involves a social phenomenon in which the prepositions and practical considerations are strongly influenced by the researcher's experiences vis-à-vis the perceptions of a particular group of people, their lifestyles, tools and technology, an eclectic approach was used that applied qualitative analysis techniques which drew from post-positivism and its different perspectives of realism, hermeneutics, symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, structuration and action. The positivistic method was not considered because it does not draw a line between the study of natural phenomenon (for example plants) and the study of social phenomenon; it uses the same means (scientific means) that are formulated and presented in terms of cause and effect.

Critical realism (one of the most common forms of post-positivism) was used because it acknowledges that all observation is fallible and therefore emphasises the importance of multiple measurement and observations (each of which can have different types of error) and the need to use triangulation across these multiple sources to try to get a better idea of what is happening in reality (Trochim 2002). The post-positivist also believes that all observations are theory-laden and that scientists (and everyone else for that matter) are inherently biased by their cultural experiences, world views, et cetera – after all, people construct their views of the world on the basis of their individual perceptions (Trochim 2002; Hammersley & Gomm 1997:31).

The structuration theory was also used because symbolic interactionism, which includes a perspective that sees reality as socially produced through the meanings that are given to objects by individual and group action – inherently then, dealing with communication, is central to the theory.

The action research method was chosen because the arguments and practical work of the study are based on an experiential approach rather than a passive observer approach. The central theme of the practical work was “vision, perception and experience”. The task called for an eclectic research method in terms of which metaphorical representation of aspects that express utopian and dystopian visions, perceptions and experiences are revealed in activities, forms and art objects of both rural and metropolitan character.

It should, however, be pointed out that this dissertation primarily concerns itself with contemporary issues about cultural change. The researcher translates these into his own art making. His work is a product of factors and influences that contribute to his own particular vision and experience of life and to that of a group of people who are close to the researcher. His creative process does not necessarily correspond to a specific scientific methodological model but inevitably amount to a process that can cross boundaries and method. This methodology is in the nature of art making and the means are justified by the outcomes.

## **EXTENT OF THE STUDY**

The dissertation has four chapters. Chapter 1 (The modern utopia and contemporary metropolis) addresses the conception and development of utopian and dystopian perceptions that arise from the introduction of modernity in the modern city/metropolis in Africa and its impact on rural folk cultures (specifically on the native Black visual-cultural fraternity of South Africa). In this context, the impact of modernism on traditional art forms and the development of modern Black artists and their urbanisation are discussed. Chapter 2 (Migrations, displacement and the reflections of utopia...)

delves into modern manifestations of utopia as characterised by the physical and psychical *movement* of artists and looks at how this utopia is expressed in the works of Tommy Motswai and Bodys Kingelez. Chapter 3 (Utopia/Dystopia reflections of urban multiculturalism) discusses how modernist and postmodernist utopian and dystopian thinking has promoted multiculturalism in Black African societies, thereby making it difficult for them to speed up cultural projects that can help to fight against capitalist exploitation to enhance social welfare and “progress”. This chapter further discusses how multiculturalism is expressed in the works of Daniel Mosaku, Santu Mofokeng and Moshekwa Langa. Chapter 4 (Utopia/Dystopia: Imaging cultures in the postmodern digital climate) delves into the utopian/dystopian impact of recent digital technological developments on both rural and urban cultures. The chapter discusses the continuing fragmentation of rural and urban cultures that results in the blurring of boundaries to homogenise all the facets of this cultural hybridisation into a consumer culture. The chapter then focuses on the researcher's art works. The art works act as a visual translation of and commentary on the cultural concerns that were raised in the previous chapters. The question as to what the future holds has never been more urgent and it is one that runs throughout the dissertation. It is a question for which the researcher cannot prescribe an answer but which he would like to bring to the urgent attention of all who hope to change the current status quo in order to fulfil their utopian dreams.

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **MODERNISM, THE MODERN METROPOLIS AND CHANGING RURAL PERCEPTIONS**

### **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter explores how modernism (through the introduction and evolution of the modern city) contributes to the conception, development and establishment of modernist utopian and dystopian perceptions in Black African communities. Although many theories have been propounded on the forces that underpin cultural change in contemporary Black African societies, little weight has been given to the role of the utopian and dystopian nature of the modern metropolis. This study suggests inter alia that rural Black African utopianism, accompanied by the aspiration to lead a good and happy life as envisaged by the characteristic style of the Western metropolis, has been instrumental in directing dynamic shifts in the material culture of tribal societies.

Although this study deals with the experiences of Black African people as a whole, specific reference is made to the rural people of Cala in the Eastern Cape of South Africa whose history forms part of the broader history of the Nguni people and the Eastern Cape. The issues of rural African utopia and dystopian perceptions are dealt with in the framework of modernist theory, field research findings, the broader history of Africa and the contemporary South African art of Black artists.

### **1.2 MODERNISM, THE MODERN CITY AND UTOPIA IN AFRICA**

Modernism is a broad and complex phenomenon with intertwining and conflicting facets that render its definition in terms of time and space a contested area of debate. The researcher will not engage in depth in this debate because it is outside the main interests of this study. Enwezor (cited in Blazwick 2001:44) states that the “notion of modernity implicates many narratives, sometimes juxtaposing, at other times positioning them with new emergent and counter narratives; all of which jostle for clear space within which the

knotted idea of the twentieth-century modern self could be fashioned”. Yet it has to be acknowledged that within the visualised enclave of modernity, the modern metropolis not only assumes a central position but is also perceived as a central driving force of the dynamic processes that underpin global cultural change in rural societies. It seems as if the dynamics that drive cultural change from rural traditional culture to contemporary modern culture centres in the metropolis; the city becomes the cultural hotspot and driving force of cultural dynamics.

When analysing modernity from a visual-cultural point of view, the researcher subscribes to the view that “artistic modernism can be seen as a continuation of the larger project of modernity, generally taken to begin with the Renaissance rise of a rationalist scientific-technological conception of the world” (Rutsky 1999:10). The period was characterised by a waning of faith in the myth, superstition and divine/spiritual control of the Dark Ages and was superseded by a revival of the arts and sciences that had flourished in classical antiquity. In Africa, modernity presented itself in similar allegorical terms. It was presented as part of an enlightenment project with instrumental or technological rationality that divested tribes of mythical and traditional beliefs which were replaced by Western religious practices that would allow modern “humanity” to know and control the world (Rutsky 1999:10). Yet, as Dona Haraway (1991:149-150) seems to suggest, the ability of technology to generate and reproduce itself opens the possibility of seeing it as something that has its own life. This divests humans of the ability to control it thereby blurring the distinction between the mythical-magical and the technological, life and death. In this respect, these magic beliefs can be held not to have died out; they were just subdued or, to put it more appropriately, relegated to a subconscious state of faith in the superior order to bless human efforts towards the *utopian project* of modernity – the dream of rational enlightenment and of scientific-technological progress.<sup>1</sup>

Although the cradle of modernity can be placed subjectively way back in the Renaissance period, the transitional period in the history of utopianism for this action-oriented utopia was in the seventeenth century (Thomas, cited in Baker-Smith & Barfoot 1987:24). It is in pursuit of this project that the eighteenth century industrial city emerged, only later to

be followed by the development of the twentieth century city – a utopia that became the exemplar of modernity when it culminated in the modern metropolis. However, the developments that characterised this urban phenomenon were not as unproblematic as the spatial image of the contemporary metropolitan outlook suggests. They were filled with massive dystopian effects that questioned the validity of the ambitious modernist project. Mourby (2003:17) observes that in recent years the number of scientifically verifiable doomsday scenarios have increased at an alarming rate. Global warming, black holes, global pollution, rapidly accelerated continental drift, the shift of the earth's axis, collision with asteroids, overpopulation and global terrorism have all been offered as credible ways whereby life can fall apart.<sup>2</sup> This chapter is not aimed at questioning the validity of the modernity project in Africa, but is instead concerned with the cultural implications of this project from a utopianist/dystopianist viewpoint that pertains to the influence of the city/metropolis on rural indigenous African cultures. At the heart of this discussion are implications that are viewed from the perspective of material culture as a reflection of social culture.

### **1.3 PRE-MODERN UTOPIA/DYSTOPIA IN AFRICA**

During colonialism, the utopian/dystopian thinking of many African societies was in some ways similar to that of pre-modern Europe. According to the elders of the current surviving “Red” communities in Cala, in research contributions by Mayer (1980) and Vogel (1997), many native pre-modern Black African societies struggled to survive in a rural-based environment that was beset with natural calamities, diseases and inter-tribal wars; they therefore tended to believe in witchcraft. The ideal perfect world was visualised as a calamity-free, peaceful and prosperous world. Because of the natives’ inability to comprehend and initiate rational processes to avert most of the disasters, they placed their faith in divine intervention – which is described by Donnelly (1998:11) as a “superior unifying order” and in the traditional African respect as that of ancestral spirits or gods. In most societies, therefore, the nature of “utopia” that prevailed was a blend of the Arcadian, Millennial, “Myths” and “Neo-conservative” utopias dealt with by Levitas (1990).

There was, and still is, a general belief that what happens in every individual's life is to a great extent controlled by the spiritual ancestral world. Emphasis is therefore not placed on individual freedom but on the nation, authority, tradition and loyalty. Thus in spite of increasing urbanism, social cohesion that is grounded in strict observation of traditions and cultural rites was and still is of utmost importance in both rural and urbanised Black African societies. Many of the objects of material culture that have come to be included in the realm of art were part of a larger unified process of communication between the societies, clans or families and the ancestors. These were characterised by masquerade rituals that involved music, dance, drama and other cultural activities (Vogel 1997:14-23; 1991:14). The physical circumstance of the object carries with it the lives of those who are involved with the object (Gosden & Knowles 2001:14). Artefacts therefore become a mirror in which people can see reflections of the fundamentals of their own culture (Graves-Brown 2000). Any change in the form or function of the artefacts signifies a cultural change in African form, function and content which are intertwined. This accounts for the anthropological definition of culture as an integration of the beliefs, attitudes (practices) and traditions of a group (Ziegler 1942:11).

#### **1.4 THE EMERGENCE OF MODERNIST UTOPIAN/DYSTOPIAN PERCEPTIONS IN AFRICA**

In Africa, the earliest main urban centres that can be characterised as cities (for example Cairo and Alexandria) were ancient cities. Much of what constitute present-day Black African cities emerged as significant urban agglomerations only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>3</sup> This begs the following questions: How did modernism and the emergence of the modern city augment the conception of modern utopian/dystopian perceptions? How does change in the social, behavioural and material cultures of the indigenous African artist reflect manifestations of these perceptions? In the forthcoming discussion, these questions are looked at in two sections: (1) the question of how Western material culture and money that were used in the exchange relations resulted in

conceptions of utopian/dystopian perceptions of the modern city, and (2) how the reciprocal exchange of African material cultural objects for money and Western objects cemented these perceptions. The cultural implications of this growth are then discussed.

The first symptoms of modernist utopianism in Africa surfaced with the infiltration of colonialism and missionary work in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The missionaries used Western objects to win over converts, while colonialists introduced trade in material culture. Gosden and Knowles (2001:6) state that colonial relations always involved material culture with the main motive, other than the extraction of natural resources, being to collect objects of material culture through trade. Such pursuits necessitated paying local people in cash and material things, and many relationships of planters and people who supplied material were constructed through the flow of materials.

Through the introduction of Western commercial objects, two forms of utopian strains were introduced: Augustine's millennial strain and Aquinas' classical strain.<sup>4</sup> According to Simmel (cited in Wolff 1950), the most significant characteristic of the metropolis is this functional extension beyond its physical boundaries. In the same way, a city consists of its total effects which extend beyond its total confines. The infiltration of Western objects into rural Africa signified the infiltration of the utopian ideal of the city into traditional societies. The superior nature of the objects symbolised the idealisation of the city as a utopian spatial phenomenon. Some objects were desired as "cargo cults" while others were desired because of their aesthetic and/or utilitarian value (Gosden & Knowles 2001:7). Social utilitarian objects such as cloth, beads and bracelets signified the utopian aspect of the city, while objects such as swords and guns contributed to its dystopian interface.

However, for many Black African societies, the image of the city at this point in time was merely idealised in imagination. Thus the line of distinction between the Augustinian city of God and the city of man remained blurred. This could be attributed to many factors but the most plausible one is that they could only relate to the city through its visually

“magical” objects, the production of which (irrespective of whether they came from missionaries or colonialists) could only be perceived in the wider context of animistic beliefs about the objects that were perceived to be of similar character to objects in their own beliefs.<sup>5</sup> Thus in Barthes’s words (cited in Buchli 2004:1): “...the ‘*tangible*’ is made to intersect with the ‘*ethereal*’, the ‘*material*’ with the ‘*spiritual*’”. Because of the nature, quality and utility value of the objects, natives believed that these objects were products of a higher spiritual ancestral order that was secretly known to White people. The desire to possess these objects was therefore two-fold: (1) to gain advantage of their functional utilitarian value and (2) to access deeper spiritual meaning. As Gosden and Knowles state:

[T]o conversely search for access to the power which is the source of objects and material wealth... people saw Western goods as posing a series of questions about their standing with ancestral powers and other spiritual forces, causing them to search for reasons why they were less well favoured by the powers of the universe. (Gosden and Knowles 2001:7–8)

They needed the objects, but they did not want to become Westerners themselves. The oppressive colonial experience favoured a disposition to cultural resistance which still prevails in the consciousness of many post-colonial societies, although practical reality may often suggest a contradictory or mixed disposition. In many African societies (both rural and urbanised) there is an ironic tendency to adopt many Western cultural practices while at the same time subscribing to the idea of preserving their own customs and traditions as informed by their ethnic origins.

Over the centuries, African societies have assimilated and incorporated many Western cultural objects and practices into their tribal cultures by giving them new meanings and functions. Even in extreme cases where societies have shown impeccable loyalty to their cultural values, signs of Western influence still surface. For example, Hammond-Tooke (1975:19) holds that although the “Red” people (*Amaqaba*)<sup>6</sup> have resisted change to a degree that is unprecedented in Africa, they could not completely render themselves

immune to all aspects of Western influence. Mayer (1980:40) records that although the practices of the ancestor religion (the core of the “Red” ideology) were performed with an orthodox attention to detail in the Eastern Cape in the 1950s, year after year new types of bodily decorations that were made of beads, strings and bottle tops and were accompanied by new songs were invented and added to the repertoire. Such ritual and recreational occasions were manifestations of dynamic processes of cultural change in the “traditional” that was impacted on by Western infiltration.<sup>7</sup> Today, research findings in Cala show that although some people have remained faithful to the “Red” code in externals such as dress, customs, rituals and kin relationships, their lifestyles have been greatly impacted by the influence of Western culture.

Among the “School” people (the adversaries of the “Red” or *Amagqoboka*)<sup>8</sup>, compromise and syncretism were highly developed to the extent that “even staunch members of the mission churches managed to combine Christian worship with ancestor worship” (Mayer 1980:32). This double religious allegiance currently remains a strong part of social-cultural religious practice in Cala. Robins and Webster (1999:70) observe that “[i]t is a remarkable feature of industrial capitalism that, throughout the transforming experiences of the past three centuries, the ideas of rural life has ‘persisted with extraordinary power’”. Consequently, this has resulted into different forms of cross-cultural blends that have led to multiculturalism (which is dealt with extensively in chapter 3 of this study).

Colonial trade relations did not only affect the cultures of the indigenous tribes; the buying of vast quantities of specimens of tribal African art for European and American collectors did not leave the colonising party untouched but also added to social cultural change. Such change did not only bring convergence or acculturation but also created new forms of difference. This was because of the fact that in both cases objects that were traded were taken out of their cultural context, stripped of their *proper function* and put in a new context that replaces it with a *system function*.<sup>9</sup> Buchli (2004) refers to this as diversion of commodities from their predestined paths on one whole area that has been dubbed tourist art. He states that in tourist art, objects that are produced for aesthetic, ceremonial or sumptuary use in small face-to-face communities are transformed

culturally, economically and socially by the tastes, markets and ideologies of larger economies (Buchli 2004:22). According to Gosden and Knowles (2001:17–18): “In producing artifacts, as well as in exchanging them, a whole series of social relationships is set up. However the production process is never one-way. People are produced through interaction with the material world as well as things.”

In other words: in the process of creating and exchanging material culture, culture is created that in turn creates us. This is an ongoing process that can subsequently manifest itself as a multiculturalism process (see chapter 3).

The process of creation and exchange of cultural artifacts resulted into cultural disintegration in the tribes. This usually begins with a division between those who are against the commoditisation of these objects because of their treasured roles (the neo-traditionalists) and those who seek them for trade (neo-modernists). In the nineteenth century the trade in these artifacts for cash brought a new cultural dimension into the equation: it introduced the money economy that turned these objects into *commodities* and their transfer to museums and galleries transformed them into *art*. Marx argues that the advent of the money economy dissolves the bonds and relations that make up “traditional” communities so that “money becomes the real community” (Marx & Engels 1952:52). We move from a social condition in which we depend directly on those whom we know personally to one in which we depend on impersonal and objective relations with others. Money and market exchange draws a veil over (masks) social relationships between things. So even though money is a signifier of the value of social labour, the perpetual danger looms that the signifier itself will become the object of human greed and desire (Harvey 1990:100). Because it becomes crucial to our realisation of our utopian dreams, it turns us against our own traditional social values and norms. Use value is replaced with exchange value, while labour is reduced to wage labour (Harvey 1990:104). In the process, another cultural facet of capitalist exploitation is broadened – the working class that constitutes a considerable part of consumer culture. In this way, it becomes a very efficient tool for cultural fragmentation. An example of this is recorded in Mayer’s findings (1980). Mayer states that “[t]he Black peasant entrepreneurs of the

nineteenth century replaced traditional responsibilities ‘by profit seeking and exploitative relations’” (Mayer 1980:36).

As already indicated above, the trade in tribal artifacts had as significant a cultural impact on the collectors from outside as it did on the societies that produced them. The objects took on a new cultural significance that laid the foundation for the conception of new ideas about the principles that should govern art making. The nature of the processes that governed their production were adopted in new theories and processes that would be upheld as modern in the avant-gardist campaign for social transformation.. According to Adorno (1991), modernist art was utopian in this respect. He attributes this to the division between “high” art and “low” art (mass culture) that made the achievements of culture (high art) belong to the ruling classes and left the lower classes with a false universality of art and a culture industry which no longer even promised happiness (Adorno 1991:6). Adorno’s theory was substantiated when architects, in pursuit of Le Corbusier’s (1887–1965) ideas, designed housing projects and clusters of accommodation (blocks of flats, et cetera) in the hope that they would meet the accommodation needs of modern man. However, as Bingaman et al (2002) suggest, a utopia by its very nature can often become repressive and authoritarian and loose sight of its ideals in the complex network of power. It is in this context that the project was counter-productive: it became repressive and totalitarian in the sense that it restricted individual freedom to a great extent.

Markus (cited in Bingaman et al 2002:19–20) elaborates on this view by arguing that different spatial structures (syntaxes) create, make possible or limit entirely different spatial relations. Structural differences signify different relations between users, degrees of freedom in the choice of routes, opportunities for chance encounters, solidarities, and possibilities for control and surveillance. Thus the project, in the blanket stratification of individuals, was perceived as repressive in that it violated their individual freedoms. Yet it is this same architecture that – through colonial domination – infiltrated Africa in the form of a modern city, a utopia, an exemplar of the fruits of enlightenment through scientific and technological development.

With the introduction of the modern city, trade in traditional tribal art forms intensified as colonialists bought vast specimens of tribal African art for European and American collectors (Vogel 1997:20; 1991:21).<sup>10</sup> Consequently, general consensual resistance to colonialism was undermined by division among those who aspired for Western civilisation with the hope of better financial prospects (the utopianists) and those who tried to defend their African identity (the dystopianists).

According to Ziegler (1942:16), “[w]herever two different cultures come into contact acculturation will take place. The degree to which acculturation proceeds depends in large measure upon the comparative strength of the cultures”. Hart (1931) says that any change that will make a mode of behaviour which seems desirable easier will generate enthusiasm. If there are prospects of financial profit, sexual gratification, loyalty to leaders or a love for the old ways, these will add to the enthusiasm. Those who aspired to Western civilisation were spurred on by these utopian prospects; they became the utopianists. However, Ziegler (1942:18) also says that “...there is usually opposition to culture change. This opposition will be centred in the vested interests whose position or prestige will be impaired by change”. Change that threatens economic interests, power, prestige or status, religious practices, sexual morals or habits, customs and traditions will probably meet with severe opposition. This is what happened in many cases to members of the tribal societies. They resisted change because they were sceptical and pessimistic of Western civilisation as enshrined in the principles of modernity. As such, they are categorised as dystopianists. Among the Nguni people of the Eastern Cape, the schism was between “Red” people (or *amaqaba*) and “School” people (or *Amagqoboka*). Cala was predominantly occupied by the “Red” people.

From a visual cultural point of view, the development of modernist utopian perceptions was therefore fuelled by profit motive from trade in tribal objects on the one hand and by the introduction of emissaries of modernity, missionary schools and art centres that encouraged and trained artists in the modern Western ways of art making on the other hand. The development of a new stronger aesthetic appeal among the natives made them realise that they could adapt to making and selling “tribal objects” as art in an effort to

better their means of obtaining a socio-economic livelihood. “So the ways of life of tribes or other groups break up or are replaced, and new patterns of living are adopted” (Ziegler 1942:9).<sup>11</sup> The urban physical and social set-up promised available markets for these art works and the city offered *new modern* tools for a socio-cultural livelihood that were both functionally superior and aesthetically more appealingly.

Central to all these capitalist exchange relationships was the complex relationship between *technology* and the *aesthetic*. Indeed, the artistic ideals that were enshrined in the complex relationship between *technology* and the *aesthetic* was not something new to the tribes – what was new was their technological and aesthetic configuration which offered an overwhelmingly easier and better life. Rutsky (1999:9) talks of this relationship as being indefinable – as it all too often is – in terms of a tendency toward *functional form* or a *machine aesthetic*. He elaborates by saying that any consideration of the technological and the aesthetic in modernism should take account not only of the tendency to “technologise aesthetics” but also of the opposite tendency. Although the traditional tribal art forms had unique qualities of aesthetisation, more often than not the aesthetisation was used as a means to enhance the importance of the function that the art work had in society.

Until the Western introduction of art, art objects and aesthetics as a sovereign cultural discipline, African tribal objects that came to be identified as *art* (by the West) were not viewed as such by the African tribes. The reason for this lies in the differences in intention as governed by the motive for making and aesthetisation: The notion of *art* is a Western construct and when the West identified a tribal object as art, the object was being contemplated purely for its aesthetic and conceptual relevance. Thus the various categories of tribal objects that have come to be integrated in the realm of *art* by the West are objects that bear the mark of quality of conceptualisation and aesthetisation which in the eyes of the West qualifies them to be identified as art. Among the different African tribes, however, the appreciation of the object (whether utility, ritual or religious) was essentially perceived from the point of view of its *function* rather than its aesthetic qualities (Vogel 1991:16). As already stated, more often than not, the object was

ingrained with aesthetic qualities for the purpose of enhancing the importance of its physical, spiritual or socio-cultural function. For example, according to Virginia Shuku (co-coordinator of Masithembe Beadwork in Cala)<sup>12</sup>, the different types of beadwork that appear in figures 1 to 6 were designated to be worn by people of different ranks in the Xhosa community. The *ithumbo* (figure 6) was originally worn by men only while the *umqokozo* (figure 3) was worn as a necklace by the women. The *isiyambane* was initially restricted to male *amaguirha* (traditional healers); its aesthetisation was governed by the cultural cult that was associated with the spiritual role of the healer. In her research on Baule art (tribal objects of the Baule people of the Ivory Coast), Vogel (1997:17) observes that “art” cannot be described from a Baule point of view in a simple manner because their view does not include “art” in the Western sense of the word. Their view focuses on the spiritual presence that is associated with the object and it is only marginally concerned with the physical form or aesthetic qualities of the object – a view that has informed the premise of her research. She states: “The many-layered objects we call African art enclose the fuller dimensions of the meaning and greater depths of response than either of these two approaches alone can accommodate” (Vogel 1997:17). It is the Western view of these objects as prized art that influenced the natives’ radical change in perception of their objects as highly valued commodities. This led to fundamental changes in what constituted a traditional African artist in the context of the Western definition.

Until the introduction of modernist art, in most Black African societies genuine tribal objects that were viewed as art by the West were produced by tribal artisans (who, in Western terms, later came to be acknowledged as artists). According to information that was gathered in Cala with regard to the Xhosa tribe, artisans belonged to a family that was specifically chosen, recognised and entrusted with the duty of producing particular types of objects for the community. Prescription was based on the belief that the power, art and skill of producing specific ritual or utility objects only ran in the blood of clans or families that were spiritually chosen by the ancestors and elders of the community. These families were believed to be endowed with the power and skill of infusing an object with the spiritual vitality that was necessary for the object to fulfil its desired function. Unlike

institutionalised academic Western training, the training of “artists” was hereditary, with the father/mother passing on the training to his/her offspring in order to continue the legacy.<sup>13</sup> Tools and techniques were standard and changed seldom. Consequently, the *form* itself was relatively standard because alternative solutions and the use of alternative materials were not standard practice. Thus African art has long been recognised as being rooted in repetition and the production of objects that correspond to predetermined types (Vogel 1991:20-21). As Cornet and , McEvilley, Jewsiewicki, Ebong, Ntendu, , Lubaki, (1989:56) observe: “African art is more an art of stereotypes than an art of creation”. The innovations and creativity that characterise contemporary so-called traditional art forms arose from the modernist influence of aesthetisation to enable the commoditisation of the works. However, even then these works are more often than not subjected to massive reproduction and repetition by many artists, thereby reducing and demeaning the identity and integrity of the original artist. It becomes difficult for the original artists and the art works themselves to be placed on a level with Western art because their enormous repetition invites a mode of categorisation that renders them analogous to Adorno’s (1991) “culture industry”.<sup>14</sup> This causes African traditional art to automatically fall under the realm of low art.

In terms of the African approach, the twentieth-century Western approach to art making is quite different. Firstly, the twentieth century saw a general devaluation of traditional pre-twentieth-century forms of art making that lead to a shift in emphasis from “illustration” to personal “expression”. The notion of the “new” (the latest), as embodied in the spirit of the avant-garde, became a central driving force of what came to be recognised as the dynamism of modern art. Artists who had been trained in Western forms of art making used modern tools and materials, with the notion of the “new” being a motivation for innovation and expression. There was therefore an open-ended broadening of scope in terms of content, context, equipment, material and techniques for the artist and what, in the end, constituted the art work itself (Kaprow in Harrison & Wood 1992:703-709). Although the artist used the art work as a medium of expressing his/her conceptual and aesthetic point of view, the quality and monetary value of the art work was more often than not determined by the capitalists in whose cultural domain the

dictates of quality and value remained. This gave the capitalist the prerogative of determining the conceptual and aesthetic value of the works in monetary terms which were often to his/her exploitative advantage.

The introduction of modernity to Africa therefore meant integrating the aspect of commoditisation to tribal objects that were perceived as deserving to belong to the cultural realm of Western *art*. This meant a displacement of functional value with a profit motive. Many tribal objects were divested of their primordial role – the traditional functional role – by replacing this role with that of an aesthetic category in order for them to be viewed as art. Consequently, the insatiable demand for them turned them into trade commodities. From the natives' point of view, they were exchanging objects of a less powerful metaphysical dimension for Western tools that were seen as potent in terms of spiritual, functional and aesthetic value. In essence, it was the commoditisation of culture for culture with the utopian aspect of *profit* being perceived as leverage to equip one better with the (*functional* and *aesthetic*) tools of modernity. The spirit that was lost in tribal objects was perceived to be capable of being recovered in the tools of modernist technology<sup>15</sup> which, as Rutsky (1999:10) observes, had been endowed with a sense of spirituality and wholeness. Yet, for the Western collectors, it was all about appreciation of the aesthetic in the physical form of the object (Vogel 1997:17).

The infiltration of capitalist market production had far-reaching implications. Some artists (both utopianists and traditionalists), lured by the profit motive, joined in the trade of tribal objects (originals) while others engaged themselves in the massive imitation and sale of originals. In due course, shoddy copies and new innovations that experimented with an eclectic mix of materials and motifs joined the tourist market in the cities and metropolises (Mazrui & Wondji 1999:588). Vogel (1991:10–11) identifies five distinct categories of visual cultural art that emerged from this acculturation: traditional art, new functional art, urban art, international art and extinct art. Although this categorisation and differentiation between the art forms can be contested, the aspect of commoditisation that came with urbanity is common to all of them. In some rural quarters cultural beliefs about tribal art objects remained (and still remains relatively) strong. However, in many parts of

rural Africa faith in them has waned as people realised that modernity had cultural tools that could offer a better life and progress. It gave tribal artists an opportunity to add the new role of commercial artist to their existing role, thereby leading to change in tribal art itself. It also opened career opportunities for previously non-privileged, and therefore unrecognised, potential artists. This meant that they could either engage in the production of traditional art forms to sell in the cities or jump at the first training opportunity in Western forms of art making.

Because very few Western art schools were established on the continent for the better part of the twentieth century, much of the art that developed out of urban–rural acculturation falls under the category of tourist art or airport art. All over Africa, different groups of artisans come together to engage in the massive production of different categories of art works that range from imitation of originals to innovations that use an eclectic mix of modern and traditional materials. The art works epitomise diluted tribal culture that is flavoured to meet the taste of Western capitalist appeal but masquerade as indigenous representation of tribal tradition. While the production of some of these art works is carried out in cultural centres in the cities, many other centres are located in rural towns where there is easy access to the relevant artistic medium is used. Many rural art centres that produce all sorts of art forms which are allied with this trade have opened up in the Eastern Cape. For example, in Cala the Masithembe Beadwork Project serves as the local production centre for this kind of art (see figures 1-6). In the cities and small towns where emerging Black businesses thrive, another art form (which Vogel [1991] identifies as urban art) has developed. This art form, commonly referred to as “popular” art is “made by artists who make signs and other commercial images for small businesses such as restaurants, market record shops or barber stands. They also make paintings which they sell to urban workers and Europeans as ‘art to look at’” (Vogel 1991:11).

## **1.5 THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY METROPOLIS – “NEW” AESTHETICS A “NEW” UTOPIA/DYSTOPIA**

As indicated in the preceding discussion, modernist utopia was introduced in rural Africa through colonial trade between the colonialists and indigenous African communities. However, for the indigenous Africans, the utopian dream changed to the pursuit of a better life by taking advantage of the use of objects of Western civilisation. The utopian vision of a Western city gradually germinated when the colonial city was introduced. The eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century cities had strong neo-classical characteristics that were evident in the architectural style that was used to symbolise the power of the British Empire. This was later coalesced with the subsequent infiltration of twentieth-century modernist architecture. In the interim period, colonialism (allegorical to the enclosure movements of 1760 and 1820) forcefully stripped the tribal communities of their communal property rights and land was privatised. This turned the dispossessed into a large, new industrial workforce that would be forced to seek employment in the growing towns through dire necessity.<sup>16</sup> As already indicted, the initial utopian reaction meant a return to a lost golden age (prior to colonisation) or succumbing to the promises of modernism which, in comparison to the former, was dystopian.

Through the infiltration of a modernist utopia viewpoint, three aspects of classical utopia were introduced: (1) the aesthetic as expressed in the new styles of architecture, (2) the political-economic as expressed in the desire for political and economic independence respectively, and (3) the socio-cultural as expressed in the new popular culture.<sup>17</sup> Yet, being a colonial establishment, the city in principle represented the interests of capitalist exploitation as grounded in the money economy. Simmel (1950:2) notes: “The metropolis has always been the seat of the money economy. Here the multiplicity and concentration of economic exchange gives an importance to the means of exchange which the scantiness of rural commerce would not have allowed.”

In addition, since money is the means of obtaining goods, it takes priority over the desired commodity to the extent that having it is as good as having the commodity. In

other words, money becomes the foundation on which people construct their utopian dreams. Money, as the supreme representation of social power in capitalist society, becomes the object of lust, greed and desire. Those who have it in excess have the privilege to exercise power over others. In fact, money fuses the political and the economic into a genuine political economy of overwhelming power relations (Harvey 1990:102). Through these power relations, the social economic activities of the exploited come under the control of the capitalist. Marx (cited in Harvey 1990:102) argues that the advent of the money economy dissolves the bonds and relations that make up traditional communities so that the money becomes the real community. In essence, money exchange relations bring different people from different cultural domains to a degree of homogeneity that binds them into a community – a consumer culture. In support of Marx, Harvey (1990:102) argues that “[t]he common language of money and commodities provide a universal basis within market capitalism for linking everyone into an identical system of market valuation [that of exchange value] and so procuring the reproduction of social life through an objectively grounded system of social bonding”.

Yet, as Simmel (1950:3) observes, this social bonding remains superficial because the individual is imperatively constrained to free himself/herself from all historical bonds. This severs the bonds between the individual and his traditional cultural milieu. Levine (1977) concurs that the normative and the structural attachments between people are undermined and the foundations of communal existence eroded (Levine 1977:1).

Money itself, as a central driving force, becomes both utopian and dystopian. It lures rural dwellers with the prospect of a better life and progress, subjecting them to division of labour and specialisation that alienate them from their means of production. Simmel (cited in Spillman:2002:28) argues that this specialisation makes each person more directly dependent upon the supplementary activities of all the others. This subjects him/her to the exploitative power of the capitalist who (in monetary terms) reduces his/her labour value to “wage value” and the “use value” of commodities that he/she purchases to “exchange value”. In the city, utopian ideals become dystopian disillusionment.

From a cultural point of view, the infiltration of city culture (money economy) into the rural areas and the subsequent invasion of rural culture in the city result in a complex multi-faceted and homogenising of cultural production in the two cultural domains that have to serve the interests of the capitalists so that they can sustain themselves. This results in a further multi-faceted of culture where binary polarities not only serve as a range but also remain the cardinal bases of description. Thus Mayer states that “[i]n rural locations of the Ciskei, where there had been many Red communities in the 1960s, there were usually only some Red homesteads left by the late 1970s. Both folk-cultures have been heavily diluted in the last 15 years or so by the spread into the country side of a new, secular, urban influenced culture” (1980:2). Money became the yardstick of judging social status, wealth and social progress, with education and business being propagated as the means whereby these could be attained.

The impact of urban influence on rural folk cultures had been expressed in rural–urban migration since the introduction of the city. As has already been indicated, three key utopian manifestations are accountable for this movement: (1) the aesthetic and cultural nature of the spatial built-up area of the modern city, (2) its objects and (3) the money economy. The fact that in this study a lot of attention is paid to the objects, their monetary exchange relations and the socio-cultural implications that arise out of these relations does not render the role of twentieth-century architecture less accountable for the resultant cultural effects. According to King (in Featherstone 1990:404):

It is fallacious to conceptualize society, culture, social organization or process without reference to the physical and spatial material reality of the built up environment. For most part, social theory deals with a world of social relations, of discourses about culture, in which the built environment, understood as the physical and spatial contexts...not only do exist but play a role...in the production and reproduction of society...[T]he built environment... does not just represent or reflect social order, it actually constitutes much of the social and cultural existence.

Thus these three factors of the built-up area of the city (as characterised by architecture, its material culture and social-economic monetary exchange relations) are a complexly intertwined system and it is difficult to speak of one without reference to the other two. Modern architecture (as a constituent part of the three) represents major paradoxical elements of utopian definition: a place; a paradise (no place). Hughes (1991:164), commenting on the role of art in fermenting twentieth-century utopian perceptions, says that “[t]he home of utopian impulse was architecture rather than painting or sculpture”. The ideal of social transformation through architecture was one of the driving forces of modernist culture. The adverse working-class social living effects of the industrial age had resulted in a movement in which architects such as Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius propagated for architecture *or* revolution. The idea was to change the *form* and *function* of architecture to meet the needs of the modern worker.<sup>18</sup> Ironically, Le Corbusier’s patrons included one or two of the biggest capitalists in France. Thus the schemes would have had to be financed from the “surplus value” which the capitalists had accumulated. This in itself rendered them utopian and, to a great extent, explains why the projects failed.

In spite of the failures of utopian schemes, the utopian form of modernist architecture and consumer-oriented environment has continued to lure people from rural cultures into the city in the hope of finding a better life. For example, the history that has been recorded of the development of Johannesburg between 1920 and 1940 (from an Edwardian colonial city into a modern metropolis) suggests that the increase in urbanisation that characterised the city in the latter half of the century was motivated by the architectural developments that gave Johannesburg the appearance of a mini New York (Van der Waal 1987: 171).<sup>19</sup>

According to Solundwana (an elder in Cala), large numbers of young men (mainly from “School” families but also some from “Red” communities) abandoned the rural areas in the 1950s and flocked to Cape Town and Johannesburg in the hope of satisfying their aspirations. Mayer (1980:38) substantiates this when he records that in the 1950s “...

those whose success stories were quoted were people who had left their local community for established homes in town”. Urbanisation took a new form which, in contemporary terms, has become a strong manifestation of the postmodern metropolis and the urban–rural–urban invasion. This form of urbanism is dealt with in chapter 2 of this study.

## **1.6 THE MIGRATION OF BLACK ARTISTS TO CITIES**

For a few rural Black Western-trained South African artists, migration had begun much earlier. These artists were trained in missionary schools, by patrons or in art centres<sup>20</sup> and found it imperative to migrate to the cities in order to realise their career dreams. They included prospective artists in music, dance and drama (as is reflected in the emergence of these art forms as independent cultural domains in the townships). To a large extent, the contemporary urban Black cultural status quo derives from these township developments. The development of these art forms as separate cultural disciplines is part of the fragmentary effect that the utopian influence of Western modernist culture had on Black Africans. As indicated earlier in this chapter, the nature of Black African culture was a unitary composition of social and religious-cultural practices that formed a unique blend of religious, music, dance, drama and visual art activities. The elements that governed the need to adopt these disciplines as careers and the profit motive that went hand-in-hand with the practice all pointed to the necessity for the artist’s relocation to the city. The motives and details of these movements with reference to selected artists are dealt with in chapter 2 of this study.

The rural–urban migration of Black artists to the cities and metropolitan centres resulted in an urban form of cultural production which was different from the one that was taking place in the rural areas. The integration of different African rural cultures with a fast-paced urban life that was characterised by demographic and ethnic segregation posited a unique blending of the two cultural forms and resulted in what came to be described as “township” or “ghetto” culture. While one cannot ignore the oppressive role of the apartheid government in creating a spatial separation of residential areas on the basis of ethnic or racial criteria, it has to be acknowledged that it was through Black migration,

exposure to oppression, separation and persistent clamour for equality and amenities that we can today discern a utopian perception of Western cultural models as epitomised in the modern metropolis. The indigenous African holds onto those cultural traits that he/she believes uphold his/her tribal identity while he/she at the same time seeks Western ways that he/she believes will guarantee a comfortable life. The result is a unique blend of Western culture and African township culture that manifests itself as an African urban culture. In the arts it crops up in the image of townships like Sophia Town and District Six, which in themselves became small utopian pockets for Black aspiring artists. Not far away from the townships, the “White” metropolitan centre remained a utopian citadel of hope for the underprivileged masses.

The growth of cosmopolitan cultures in the metropolises on the continent can therefore be attributed to two significant factors: (1) the twentieth-century technological advancement that expressed itself in the new modes of architectural styles and scientific tools of social progress, and (2) the faith that people put in these new developments as expressed in urbanism and rural–urban migration. The relationship between technology and aesthetics becomes a cardinal point of reference because in as much as the spirit of modernism expressed a desire to “technologise aesthetics”, so too was there a desire to “aestheticise technology” (Rutsky 1999:9). The result was a new and complex spatial phenomenon (the modern metropolis) that boasted “functional forms” of architecture which “were rarely particularly technological or functional; they merely ‘looked’ technological, [or] functional” (Rutsky 1999:11). In other words, they were essentially *utopian*.

## **1.7 CONCLUSION**

Just as the essence of technology is not static but a dynamic ongoing process or *movement*, so too is the utopian aspect of the metropolis. It is this view that has accounted for the increasing urbanisation that characterised the movement of African artists from the 1950s to the present. What began as a modernist cultural invasion of the rural areas turned into a rural cultural invasion of urban areas. This affirms Ziegler’s (1942:19)

observation that “[t]here is a reciprocal relationship between individuals and culture. The culture influences greatly the individual. On the other hand, culture is quite dependent on the individuals and is modified by the individuals who compose the group and the ones who surround the group”. In effect, we create culture and culture creates us. When artists adopt new tools for artistic practice, the tools transform their cultural artistic production – which in turn results in the creation of new cultural art works that have a new impact on society.

The translation of traditional art objects into art, the emergence of cross-cultural traditional-modern hybrid art forms, the emergence of Black artists who practice in Western art mediums and the migration of Black artists to the cities all points to the utopian influence of profit-seeking exploitative relations as entrenched in modernism and its central driving force, the modern city. Manifestations of these perceptions did not only drive artists to adopting modernist visual cultural practices, but they also emerged in various forms of correlated movements. These movements (psychical, physical and artistic) all operated in the conceptual framework of transition from and transformation of African tradition to Western modern Africanness. Ordinarily, these movements are epitomised in the secondary movement of populations from agrarian to industrialised and national to post-national and transnational, with preconceptions of the metropolis as the ideal destination (Enwezor 1998:2). Effectively, artists remain nomads in a state of physical and/or psychical transition, whose sensibilities “have been shaped by personal journeys and experiences that move beyond national understanding of themselves” (Cassel 2000:1). It is from these experiences that they develop a new verbal and visual language that finds expression in their perceptions in their art work. In consequence, culture itself remains a very unstable phenomenon. The decentring and assemblage of cultural forms over time that are characterised by the movement of artists, changes in cultural production processes and the environment that directs these processes all show that culture is in a continuous state of flux.

When we study the lives of artists such as Gerard Sekoto, Durant Sihlali and Dumile Feni, we see manifestations of utopian perceptions in their physical migratory

movements; it is in the works of artists like Tommy Motswai and Central African artist Bodys Isek Kingelez that we see reflections of utopian perceptions with regard to the metropolis. In both cases, however, their works tend to express the utopian/dystopian impact of the city on indigenous African cultures. The next chapter of this study focuses on the manifestation of utopian perceptions of the metropolis as evidenced in different forms of movement. It shows how these perceptions are expressed in the works of Tomy Motswai and Bodys Isek Kingelez, and the resultant cultural implications that are expressed in these works.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Dona Haraway (and many others) generally acknowledge that both modes – the “rational conversations” and the “fantastical imaginings” – are important traditions that are not as distinct from each other as they would appear to be at first glance.

<sup>2</sup> Mourby (2003:16) suggests that utopia and dystopia are symbiotically linked; the utopian spirit that is associated with the emergence of the modern metropolis was born from the programme to counter the adverse effects of science and technology that had characterised the industrial city. The twentieth-century metropolis that emerged resulted in a renewal of hope and utopia in the city; however,, alongside it were other technological and non-technological dystopic developments that seemed to paint a picture of a bleak future (for example the 1950s and 1960s were marked by fear of UFOs, Cold War tensions, growing dependence on technology and increasing consumerism).

<sup>3</sup> According to Rondinelli (1988:291-2) , some of these cities were indigenous urban centres that emerged from commercial, trading, administrative and/or defensive centres; some were Islamic cities; and others were colonial cities that were created by foreigners for their own economic and political purposes and were shaped by aesthetic principles.

<sup>4</sup> In the *Retractions* Augustine explains that in writing *The city of God* he had a two-fold purpose in mind: (1) to refute the “worshippers of many false gods, whom we call by the customary name pagans...” and (2) to articulate a positive theological doctrine. Although Augustine was trying to defend Christianity from the pagan’s blame that Christians had been responsible for the destruction of Rome, the missionaries saw that this could very well apply to the natives. Whereas in Augustine’s view order was based upon contrast and dichotomy, for Aquinas the concept of order was founded on natural order and supernatural order. The two were not opposite orders that were in conflict with each other but rather different orders with different operating principles (Donnelly 1998:32–33).

<sup>5</sup> At this time tribal African societies were going through a period of human development which in Robins and Webster’s (1999) words is described as, “...where the means of vision and means of production were intimately connected -or were felt to be by the people concerned – I refer to the magical systems under which it was not possible to plough the ground without a prayer – to eat without a blessing, or to hunt an animal without a magical formula. To build without a sense of glory” (1999:35).

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<sup>6</sup> *Amaqba* refers to “heathens”, (those who paint themselves with ochre) and *ukuqaba* refers to paint or smearing the body with *imbola* (clay of red or ochre colour) which is ground and mixed with fat. The term *qaba* is used by Reds to refer to themselves; when it is used by non-Reds it often has derogatory undertones. Especially in Eastern Cape towns *qaba* has the meaning of a socially awkward, stupid, ill-mannered, uneducated and backward person (Mayer 1980:72, with additions from research findings). The “Reds” believed that adoption of Western civilization would only subject them to colonial domination. One elder (of Chief Dalindyebo’s family) in Mbenge-Cala stated that, according to them, religion, urbanity and its Western scientific tools of social progress were part of a bigger plan by the White “man” to subjugate them with colonial domination. To them, the civilising mission would only bring misfortune and they were therefore extremely skeptical about modernity and urban life.

<sup>7</sup> Here the use of the term “traditional” becomes problematic because change denotes a deviation from tradition. Yet, in spite of the fact that upholding old meanings that are attached to the material cultural processes is as important as the cultural processes themselves, the term is still applied to changing indigenous cultures.

<sup>8</sup> *Ukugqoboka* means to convert to Christianity, to be pierced through so that a hole is made or to be perforated. It is a state of conversion as opposed to a state of heathenism (Mayer 1980:72). The Amagqoboka (the “School” people) looked for human dignity in the achievements of Western civilization that were epitomised in the aspect of the city. They were therefore very eager to adopt Western ways (through education and urbanisation) in the utopian hope that they would be in a better position to resist colonialism and would in due course reap its benefits after decolonisation.

<sup>9</sup> According to Graves-Brown (2000:26), something has a given performance as its *proper function* when it has been reproduced or copied from ancestors who engaged in that performance, and it has survived and proliferated precisely by virtue of performing it. *System function* focuses on what a thing actually does or is disposed to do in its current system context.

<sup>10</sup> With the abolition of slave trade, matters worsened for the African merchants and rulers. Because they could no longer use slaves as leverage in their trade transactions, they had to search for commodities which they could exchange for consumer goods and weapons since their comfort, wealth and protection depended on them (Ajai 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Here Ziegler is elaborating on the lamentations of a chief of the Digger Indians that was recorded by R Benedict (1934. *Patterns of culture*. New York: Houghton). Ziegler acknowledges these lamentations as facts: “God has provided for the development in every tribe, nationality, sect or other group of a way of life which is peculiarly its own. Each has its clay cup. But the cups break or are thrown away to be replaced with other cups or are put on the shelf to be looked on as relics while the water of life is taken through other vessels” (Ziegler 1942:9). Although the term “cup” is metaphorically used to refer to tribal culture, it has an allegorical reference to a functional tribal object that loses its value because of the infiltration of Western capitalism. Tribal objects are either transformed and adopted into the Western decorative cultural realm of art or are discarded to be replaced with Western modern tools to perform their function.

<sup>12</sup> In a personal interview conducted on the 10 day of March 2007.

<sup>13</sup> The practice forms one of the definitions of culture adopted by Ziegler (1942) from Folsom (1928): as, “... the sum of all that is artificial in the life of a group of people. It is their complete outfit of tools and habits invented by man and then passed from generation to generation.” (Ziegler 1942:10). This definition is in contrast to meaning that is given it by popular modern Western usage where it refers to enlightenment and refinement of taste acquired by intellectual and aesthetic training.

<sup>14</sup> In one of his essays, ‘*Culture Industry Reconsidered*’ (1991), Adorno states, “The culture industry fuses the old and familiar into a new quality. In all its branches, products which are tailored for consumption by

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the masses, and which to a great extent determine the nature of that consumption, are manufacture more or less according to plan.

<sup>15</sup> Chinua Achebe in his famous novel *Things fall apart* reiterates this reinfusion when, through his characters, he talks about the natives' view of the motorcycle as an iron horse. Joseph Diesco does the same in his *Troubled waters* when Black natives of Namibia are portrayed as viewing a radio as a sacred box in which White ancestors are kept and from which they speak.

<sup>16</sup> The enclosures were fundamentally about bringing realms that had hitherto been exempted into the new and expanding commercial relationships that marked the growth of capitalism. The logic of the enclosure was the logic of the new capitalist order; it was this alien order that the Luddites (dystopians) sought to resist (Robins & Webster 1999:7).

<sup>17</sup> "Concrete, skyscrapers, flyovers, radio towers – these were the public signifiers of progress given an intellectual and cultural agenda by the avant-gardes of art" (Blazwick 2001:10).

<sup>18</sup> "By the word *l'architecture*', an educated Frenchman of 1870 did not mean public housing, factories, or workers' clubs. He meant ceremonial buildings that demonstrated the important public functions of a bourgeois bureaucracy: banks, ministries, museums, railway stations, and palaces" (Hughes 1991:166).

<sup>19</sup> This was an extension of the activities of the School of Architecture of the University of the Witwatersrand and the growing interest in the identification with the architectural principles of the International Style of Architecture. Although proposed planning favoured Le Corbusier's "La Ville Radeuse" and the principles were foiled by the Natives (Urban Areas) Act 21 of 1923, the development of the metropolis continued with many of its areas having the influence of the International Style. The city was given many flattering sobriquets such as "Wonder of the modern world" and "Miracle of the Empire".

<sup>20</sup> Such art centres include Rorke's Drift Art and Craft Centre and Ndeleni Art School.

**CHAPTER 2**  
**MIGRATIONS, DISPLACEMENT AND REFLECTIONS OF UTOPIA**  
**IN THE WORKS OF TOMMY MOTSWAI AND**  
**BODYS ISEK KINGELEZ**

**2.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter discusses the implications of movement (migrations/displacement) as a manifestation of Black African artists' perceptions of the contemporary metropolis. For the purposes of this discussion, two forms of movement are considered: (1) the *physical movement* of artists from rural to urban areas, agrarian to industrialised areas, and national to post-national and transnational areas, and (2) the *psychical movement* of artists which is a journey of the mind that is manifested in longings, nomadic thoughts and wanderings that culminate in the artistic representation of the contemporary metropolis as a utopia.

The first part of this chapter refers to specific artists and discusses the various forms of physical migration and movement as a manifestation of utopian perceptions. Later, the focus of the discussion shifts to a contextual analysis of the manifestations of utopian perceptions as characterised by some black South African artists' modernist and postmodernist physical migration and movements (in and out of the country) to metropolitan centers.

The second part of this chapter focuses on the psychical movement of the artists: a personal journey of the mind that goes beyond the physical confines of space and time to translate a utopian vision into an art work that expresses a utopian view of the metropolis. Two contemporary Black African artists have been selected for this purpose: Tommy Motswai (a South African artist) and Bodys Isek Kingelez (from the Democratic Republic of Congo). Their works have strong traits of their utopian perceptions of the

metropolis. It is important to note that this discussion hinges on the notion that whether viewed from a physical, metaphorical or cultural context, the utopian aspect of the metropolis is central to understanding the past and contemporary issues that surround nationalisation, globalisation and the multicultural phenomenon.

From a historical visual-cultural perspective, two aspects have emerged as strong manifestations of utopian/dystopian perceptions of the modern metropolis: (1) the restless physical movement of the nomadic artists and (2) the artistic expression of their thoughts on the metropolitan space. While the former can easily be discerned from the rural–urban migratory movement of artists, the latter can be inferred from the thematic expression of an artist’s vision as manifested in his/her art work. In expressing their perceptions, most of the artists have either focuses on the panoramic view of the architectural and technological aspects of the city (placing little emphasis on its inhabitants) or have emphasised the city’s inhabitants and have subordinated the architectural settings of the city (Frisby 1993: 90). However, whether viewed from a socio-cultural or structural point of view, practical experience has shown that the perceptual view of the city more often than not contradicts an outsider’s view of the city. From outside, the modern city still projects the hopes that over the centuries have been harboured by planners, architects, philosophers and social reformers. It is in this regard that “ particular ways of ordering space might have a salutary effect on society, communities, families and individuals” (Bingaman et al 2002:1). In spite of the pitfalls of the twentieth-century utopian urban projects and the multitude of problems that have arisen from overurbanisation, the notion of the city as an ideal place remains rooted in many rural and urban societies.

In Africa strong manifestations of this perception are characterised by the increasing flood of national and transnational migrants to the popular cities and metropolitan centres. “The age selectivity of rural migrants (largely teenagers and young adults) further contributes to the city’s growth through new family formation and natural increase” (Dogan & Kasarda John 1988:15). As Mosquera (2004:88) observes: “The cultural implications of this demographic penchant are obvious. A most important one is the complex, metamorphic and multilateral process that entails the substitution of the

traditional rural environment by the urban situation, a clash that involves a massive amount of very diverse people.” The result is a complex process of acculturation that results in a multitude of cultures which compete with each other for survival, food and space in conditions that can only be defined by the word “filth”.<sup>1</sup> If we adopt Gomel and Weninger’s view (2004:65) that “a perfect city” has always been imaged as a sparkling crystal, then these migrants are outside the threshold of their imagined ideal and can only long for it as the rural dwellers do. They are therefore susceptible to sharing the same utopian perceptions of rural dwellers. Their utopian aspirations drive their imagination into utopian excursions of the mind that misinterpret ornamental appearance of architecture, technological sophistication and social glamour for the idealistic and paradise. This is not to say that this glamorous set-up cannot be of any benefit to the individual; however, as Godfrey (2004:9) argues, many of the famous projects of modernist architecture are designed exclusively for the moneyed classes. This is what Kitsch (2002:5) refers to as “utopian myopia” (that is, criticism is frequently levelled against utopianists who focus their visions on the life experiences and desires of some individuals while seemingly remaining blind to that of others). The social stratification that arises can never maintain the created parallelism because the marginalised will always seek to join the privileged. In the context of rural-urban classification, migration from the former to the latter will always be symptomatic of a utopianist drive.

As argued previously in this chapter, for utopian artists who were born in the rural areas, migration to the city is an imperative and a clear manifestation of utopian perceptions; however, on account of the politics of classification (gender, race, and tribe), more often than not the reality in the city turns utopia into disillusionment, frustration and disappointment. This blurs the distinction between the rural-urban migrant and the urban-born artist, especially when it comes to lamenting unfulfilled longings and/or unsatisfied hopes. Both categories of artists will share in the consequent utopian/dystopian effects that arise from unfulfilled longings. These effects can find expression in physical journeys in search of the desired ideal metropolis or psychical journeys that express the envisioned ideal in an art work. The notion of *movement*, whether viewed from a physical perspective or an artistic perspective, becomes central to understanding the utopian spirit

that characterised the metropolitan migrations and artistic movements of twentieth-century artists. Benson (in Johnson 2005:132) discusses the concept of utopia as “no place” and “good place” in a synthetic history of the avant-gardist’s paradoxical and productive relationship with the concept. Artists moved from a visionary “no place” of utopia to the real conditions of the metropolis where the fantasies of the avant-garde turned into the pragmatic architecture of the industrialised metropolis. It is the utopian nature of this architecture that in turn fuelled the migratory movement of peoples, resulting further in the expansion of the cities into metropolitan centres. To explain how the expansion of twentieth-century cities has impacted on this movement, Blazwick (2001:8) adopts cultural theorist Raymond Williams’s view that the expansion of these cities into metropolitan centres converted these cities into transnational capitals that act as stopping-off points for artists and intellectuals on an international circuit.<sup>2</sup> According to Enwezor (1998:1), how “[t]he presence of these artists changed in many parts of the world captures in manifold ways the reality of arrivals and departures that everyday is played out in airport terminals, train stations, docks, etc., throughout the world”. He further suggests that, these artists’ language of expression is transformed in as much as they also influence the transformation of the normative forms of expression in the sites that they occupy. The result of this is acculturation, a cultural change which according to (Ziegler 1942:16) will affect both the artists and those whom they come into contact with in the sites they visit..

## **2.2 MIGRATION AND DISPLACEMENT AS MANIFESTATIONS OF UTOPIAN ASPIRATIONS**

According to Aina (Baker & Aina 1995:42), “[m]igration which refers to spatial residential relocation over a relatively long period of time is an aspect of population movement. It includes international migration which is movement across national boundaries, and internal migration which refers to intranational more or less permanent (or long-term) changes of residence”. Aina also observes that “[m]igration is not a new phenomenon in the history of Africa” (Baker & Aina 1995:41). It has occurred on a substantial scale in many instances in the history of the continent.

Migration and displacement has been a dominant feature of the Southern African region. South Africa, which has been identified as the cradle of mankind, is believed to be the starting point of radial movement to the northern, eastern and western parts of the globe. Central to all the pre-modern migrations that have characterised the region is the romantic notion of and/or search for the unspoilt, uncontaminated and unclaimed land that is visualised in the context of the Biblical Garden of Eden or Canaan. It dates as far back as the chronicles of the San, the earliest recorded hunter-wanderer inhabitants of the region who (as part of their religious cult) repeatedly adorned specific sites of the region with rock paintings and engravings. In doing this, they inevitably laid resourceful and religious claim not only to the sites but also to a range of hunting grounds that were under the influence of these sites (Nettleton & Hammond-Tooke 1989). The settlements of the various Bantu groups that migrated from the central and eastern parts of the continent then followed. These were followed by the arrival of White farmer settlers whose penetration into the interior brought them in contact with the Xhosa and resulted in frontier clashes which the colonial government decided to resolve through annexation. The Voortrekkers decided to migrate north to the interior in search of freedom and self-determination (Mayer 1980:6-7).

The twentieth century ushered in modernism which contextually shifted the idealisation that was entrenched in the notion of utopia from land as a resource to mechanisation and industry. The focus therefore began to shift from the rural to the urban. With catastrophes hitting rural societies, the development of mining, industry and urban centres all orchestrated different kinds of movements that made displacement and migration in South Africa part of the global phenomenon. The different categories of movements that followed comprised the movements of the rural–urban migrants, the “uitlanders” (the migrants who left the country) and the influx of foreign nationals who entered the country after South Africa’s democratic transformation in 1994 (Tomlinson, Beauregard, Bremner & Mangcu 2003:xll; 48; 111).

Keith Dietrich, one of South Africa's leading authorities on the nexus between art and migration/globalisation and identity, is a kind of artist/explorer who has a fascination for history and works with maps and journeys. He uses them to visually interpolate his ideas, particularly those regarding issues of globalisation and identity. He has travelled widely overseas and extensively in South Africa (Gurney 2006). Dietrich (cited in Gurney 2006) attacks the mindset that characterises the South African aesthetic cultural environment of conforming to Western bourgeoisie aesthetic values as epitomised in the twentieth-century rural–urban migrations to the extent of referring to this phenomenon as a step towards idealism and cultural refinement. He states that “[w]ithin the dominant Western-oriented cultural environment in South Africa ‘cultural refinement’ is understood as conforming to Western bourgeoisie aesthetic values and ideals to the exclusion of other cultural or class values” (Gurney 2006:2). This mindset is grounded in a firmly established belief in “traditional” (rural) African cultures that Western culture is about modernity and modernity is the epitome of *idealism* and *cultural refinement*. If we are to further the argument that the level of modernity is governed by the level of urbanity, then the metropolis becomes a cultural landscape that epitomises the highest level of *ideality* and *cultural refinement*. The metropolis is viewed as “a perfect city” and because of the long tradition that ascribes perfection to diamonds, the city as a sparkling crystal is imaged as the epitome of *ideality* and *cultural refinement* (Gomel & Weninger 2004:65).

Much of this image can be attributed to the panoramic view that is accentuated by the latest architectural and technological developments; however, as Dietrich argues, this view is always mediated and therefore susceptible to erroneous perception (Gurney 2004:1. In his work, there is inter alia a thematic repetition of tension between *fact* and *fiction* and between *reality* and *appearance*. What is perceived as *real* about the metropolis is just *appearance* and is therefore utopian. It is this utopian perception that continues to account for the massive global rural–urban migratory movements of peoples that characterised the twentieth century. In the African context, there is increasing migration of Black Africans to urban centres on the continent and a growing diaspora of people from these centres to the West. This certainly increases the issues about the racial and ethnic identity of the contemporary urbanised Black African. The next part of this

discussion analyses these movements as part of the process that promoted the emergence of South African professional Black artists whose “Africanness” (like many other African artists) remains a debatable issue. As Youngelson -Neal, Neal & Fried (2001:3) observe:

The surging complexities of the forces of globalisation test the abilities of any society to absorb the radically “new” against the context of their traditional values and social infrastructures. Because the economic and technological forces span the local and the global, the culturally specific and the culturally universal, there must be an inevitable paradox of context and conflict of interests.

In respect of movement, culture remains a contextual and an unstable phenomenon.

### **2.3 MIGRATION AND MOVEMENT, AND THE EMERGENCE OF PROFESSIONAL BLACK ARTISTS**

The emergence of professional Black artists in South Africa as it is associated with the first massive urban-oriented utopian migrations in the region is recorded as occurring in the early part of the twentieth century. De Jager (1992) is of the opinion that it occurred in the 1940s and 1950s. Although much of the literature on the subject tends to attribute this migration to the unfavourable socio-political and economic climate that characterised the rural areas in the country<sup>3</sup>, it is worth noting that these unfavourable conditions only served to fuel utopian thinking on part of the native inhabitants. In part II of Bingaman et al’s (2002) essays *Civilisation/Degeneration*, the authors reveal how utopian visions of “the city beautiful, the colonial paradise, the radiant city – depend upon the presence of dystopic elements” [in the rural set-up] (Bingaman et al 2002:9). These elements articulate the phenomenal contrasts between the two sites of cultural difference, exposing the powers, privileges and amenities that are enjoyed by those who inhabit the city (in this context the White artists).

Thus the South African city as an architectural work of art and as an expression of civilisation took on a utopian mantle to which aspiring Black artists looked to realise their

dreams. This is mentioned as taking effect as early as 1920 when Johannesburg is reported to have looked like a mini New York (Van der Waal 1987:171). Van der Waal observes that “the city was given many flattering sobriquets such as ‘Wonder of the modern world’ and ‘Miracle of the Empire’” (1987:171–172). One can only imagine the spectacle: towering and uniquely constructed structures with elevators, neatly manicured parks, the roaring throttle of car engines on concrete tar roads, shopping centres, restaurants, music in bars and night clubs, dancing, the neon dazzling lights, advertisements on billboards – all punctuated with the sophistication of smartly dressed people who go about in an atmosphere of festive hubbub. The image was so irresistibly utopian that the earliest rural-based Black aspiring artists had no alternative but to focus on the city in the hope of fulfilling their dreams.<sup>4</sup> Yet, ironically, this city (from a utopian/dystopian point of view) uniquely represented the power of the state machinery that was imposed to marginalise and oppress Black people. However, Dogan and Kasarda (1988:21) observe that “[w]hereas additional numbers of migrants may bring more costs than benefits to the city, migration improves the conditions of the rural migrants who view the economic and social benefits of moving to the large city as substantially outweighing the costs”. Thus, with conditions in the rural areas continuing to worsen, many Black people were constrained to migrate to the city. This view of the city and the longing to migrate and settle in the ambit of its confluence were the earliest manifestations of utopia. Mayer (1980:38) records:

Town, even in the unattractive form of the Black townships, appeared to many School people – and especially the young – as less “backward” than the country, as offering more scope for “civilized” living. It tended to offer wider opportunities, not only in terms of money to be earned, but also in terms of friendships to be made and recreations to be enjoyed.

From this assertion, one can logically deduce that besides the city centre, Black townships themselves were a utopian scenario that attracted rural society to migrate to the city. Life in the townships was envisioned as being far more sophisticated, thrilling and exciting in comparison to the tame, backward, serene and quiet atmosphere of rural

homeland lifestyle. Powered by the development of new technology, the townships became crossroads for a huge range of disciplines in social cultural arts and pop culture activities. Markets, art, dance, music, film, literature and sport were brought into relation with each other as part of social entertainment. Music became a key medium for the expression of utopian longings. Townships like Sophiatown, District Six and New Brighton became key attraction centres for rural migrants. For the emerging aspiring modern Black artist, moving to the city was an imperative. The artist needed training to bring him/her abreast with the prevailing modernist artistic trends. He/she could only acquaint himself/herself with these trends in the city. Besides, there was more to life than what the rural could provide. Thus the following migratory movements are recorded to have taken place by the respective artists:

- According to De Jager (1992:6), Gerard Sekoto (1913–1993), one of South Africa’s pioneer artists, who was born in Botshabelo (near Middelburg in Gauteng) and formally educated in the rural Lutheran mission there, migrated to Sophiatown in 1938. After being trained by Roger Castle of St Peters School in Rossetenville, Johannesburg, he began his career which (as we shall see below) involved a series of nomadic migratory movements.
- George Pemba’s (1912-present) humble origins lie in Hillskraal, Korsten Village. He is said to have travelled widely in South Africa after his formal training, before settling in Port Elizabeth.
- Julian Motau was born in Tzaneen. He moved to Soweto at the age of 15, where he lived in Alexandra Township until his death at the age of 20.

Other artists whose longings for better prospects constrained them to relocate to the urban centres include Ephraim Ngatane and Job Kekana (De Jager 1992). For these artists, the new conditions would be an experience that would ferment a passion for visual vocabulary that could be used in expressing their defiance and longings.<sup>5</sup>

According to Markus (cited in Bingaman et al 2002:15), “[n]o definition can obscure utopia’s double effect: oppressive, alienating elements coexist with liberating,

humanizing ones. These visions are divided by the most fragile boundary from their inverse – dystopia”. Within South Africa’s metropolitan forces of human oppression lay the humanising ones. These emerged in the form of White patron artists and missionary centres which not only played a significant role in the establishment of modern art training centres but also in the training of aspiring artists. One of the leading figures in this regard is Cecil Skotnes. After being appointed cultural officer in 1952, he extended and further established the art centre that became known as the Polly Street Art Centre. Through his personal endeavours and influence, Skotnes was able to attract financial support for the centre from a variety of sources. With the help of Gideon Uys and Edoardo Villa, the Polly Street Art Centre was established as a fully-fledged art centre. The centre was closed in 1960 when the authorities needed the building. The art school then moved to the Jubilee Centre. The beneficial and positive influences that were started at the Polly Street Art Centre continued there under the guidance of Skotnes. Among the artists who emerged from the Polly Street Art Centre and the Jubilee Art Centre are Ephraim Ngatane, Louis Maqhubela, Durant Sihlali, Eli Kobeli, Welcome Koboka, David Mogano, Sydney Kumalo, Ezrom Lagea, Patrick Moutloa, Godfrey Ndaba, Leonard Matsoso and Dumile Feni.

Thus the period that followed the wave of the Black pioneer artists turned out to be a crucial stage in the development of modern Black professional artists in the cities and metropolitan centres. The period also underlined the emergence of a new urban cultural phenomenon – one of “otherness” that is a hybrid of indigenous African and Western cultures, rural and urban cultures, traditional and modern cultures: the Township culture. Within the framework of urban demographics, townships occupied the first significant space of rural–urban transition. From a utopian/dystopian perspective, townships remain distinctly utopian in spite of their dystopian realities.

Most of these realities emerged when Whites adopted the utopian imperative to produce ordered and regulated lives for themselves through land demarcation and control of the movement of people that was enforced through the establishment of the homelands, the Group Areas Act and the pass system. The resistance to the brutal enforcement of these

measures often ended in arrests, killings or forced removals. It is in this climate of alienation, marginalisation and oppression that the new urbanised generation of Black artists (in varied forms and content) found a visual cultural voice of expression that commented on the painful experiences of their lives in the townships. For example, Sekoto's career culminated with township scenes like *Hotela Bantu*, *Street Scene* and *Women and a Child*; while Pemba portrayed street scenes in *New Brighton*. Influences of Christian instruction also begin to surface in some of the art works of the urbanised artists. Pemba recreated *The Return of the Prodigal Son* in an image of a urbanised and Westernised Black Christian ("School") family set-up of the 1960s. Themba ka Mathe (Sa:1) observes: "...the works of artists like Durant Sihlali and Andrew Matjuoadi show the strong influence of Christianity in the 1960s. Matjoudi's *ZCC Baptism, vicinity of Mamelodi Township, Pretoria*, and Sihlali's *The Blessing* variously show African people either being baptized, blessed or confessing their sins."

These works suggest a strong occurrence of millennial beliefs<sup>6</sup> and a sign of dystopia as Black people resort to the pursuit of Christian divine intervention. In the meantime increasing urbanisation also exacerbated the situation, creating adverse, worsening and deplorable social and economic conditions in the townships. This led to a shift in visual emphasis to depictions of the mines, slums, Western clothing, cars, poverty and oppression. These themes are expressed in the charcoal drawings of Julian Motau (such as *Mother Africa* [1968])<sup>7</sup> and in the works of Ephraim Ngatane, Dumile Feni and Ezrom Lagae. Individually, artists experienced these painfully penetrating conditions differently; some attempted nomadic relocation from place to place but to no avail. Eventually those who found conditions too difficult to bear decided to go into self-exile. This became an eye-opener to other artists who aspired to migrate to the metropolitan centres in the West – although movement was restricted and monitored, it was not an impossibility.

## **2.4 MIGRATIONS OF BLACK ARTISTS TO THE WEST**

From time immemorial, the migration and diasporic tendencies of artists have been (and still are) a behavioural trait of artists all over the globe. According to Blazwick (2001:9),

“[I]ong before the radiating lines of airline companies criss-crossed the world, artists and intellectuals had tracked the trade routes of ideas around the globe. These routes had hubs.” This suggests that the utopian/dystopian aspect of the city plays a role in the motivation of the movements of artists. A casual glance at the history of the nineteenth-century and twentieth-century migrations and movements of artists suggests that artists tend to relocate to popular “premier” metropolitan cultural centres.<sup>8</sup> Aina (Baker & Aina 1995:41) notes:

[A]s a specific form of population movement the phenomenon had its own pursuit of sheer survival, the search for better opportunities and improved conditions, and of course, the consolidation of advantages and benefits. These broad elements have to a great extent governed the expression of this phenomenon of permanent (or in many cases in Africa extended) spatial relocation..

Aina argues that the post-colonial modernisation of African states has led to changes in social formation that reveal other forms of migration, for example non-metropolitan migration. Although he attributes the prevalence of motivation for migration to colonial circumstances, he does not deny that the above elements still remain the main cause of internal and transnational metropolitan migration. If this motivation is analysed in the context of Todd and Wheeler’s (1978:7) definition of “utopia” (see the introduction of this study), it would be logical to perceive migration as a reflection of a “utopian” strain on the part of the migrant – thus substantiating the view of the metropolis as a utopia.<sup>9</sup> According to Enwezor (1998:28) and Allara (2001:1) the increasing migration of Black artists has been mainly from rural to urban centres on the continent and then from those centres to the crowded popular metropolitan cultural centres of the Western hemisphere. With regard to South Africa, these patterns of migration and movement from the country to the Western hemisphere began with the emergence of modernist professional Black artists during the apartheid period and continued into the post- (after 1994) democratic transition migrations.

Because of a lack of sufficiently detailed literature on the post-1994 migration of artists, the focus of this part of this discussion generally remains on the artists of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. In a sense, their migration was mainly motivated by three factors: (1) the prevailing adverse political, social and economic conditions in the country, (2) their personal utopian ambitions that were fuelled by their early successes and the successes of their White counterparts, and (3) the alluring effect of the leading cultural metropolises of the Western hemisphere. Two artists have been selected for the purposes of this study: Gerard Sekoto and Dumile (Mhlaba-) Feni (1939–1991). Women artists have not been selected because in the period when these movements took place, women artists (both White and Black) were marginalised to such an extent that there were very few Black African women artists. The metropolitan centres were gendered as much as they were racialised and all opportunities for professional visual artistry remained stifled by White male, patriarchal domination.

According to Manovich (1997:5), “[f]or young artists born in Africa moving to one of the centres of the Western hemisphere like New York or London is a necessity if they want to have any art career at all, while for artists born in the West it is a matter of choice. Very often diaspora is a story of personal despair and lack of any other opportunities.” He quotes Enwezor’s comment (cited in Manovich 1997:5):

The question is what has happened in Africa in the last 20 years? Why people had to move out of their own country and where did they move to? I think the metropolis is maybe more receptive to this conglomeration of peoples and identities converging together. Not necessarily at the centres of these spaces, but on the peripheries, on the margins of it. The metropolis is no longer a centre, but a place which is fragmented.

While this comment was made with reference to diasporic artists who migrate from Africa, it is more applicable to artists who migrate to urban centres in their respective countries and on the continent. The former precedes the latter. The diasporic nomadism that was characteristic of the modernist South African non-White artists like Sekoto, Feni

and Sihlali was a direct consequence of their inability to realise their utopian dreams and therefore they continued their nomadic search. In order to understand their movements, it becomes imperative to analyse the socio-economic conditions in which the artists operated prior to their migration and how these conditions contributed to their migration in terms of Manovich's observation. Perhaps this will help us to understand why most artists who do not migrate remain in a state of psychological nomadic transit.

When it comes to South Africa's long history of social inequality, it is difficult to discuss the migration and movements of the artists to the West without considering the socio-economic climate that governed and motivated their migration. Indeed, it is on account of certain White patrons' unselfish generosity that many Black artists were able to rise to unanticipated heights; however, in spite of this rise, the Black artist's life (as already indicated) remained relatively enmeshed in the misery and squalid conditions of the township – or even worse, ghetto life. This was due to the legitimisation of the politics of race, class and gender that was characterised by spatially zoning, centring and privileging “White” people over people from other racial categories (Van Robbroeck 1998).<sup>10</sup> However, this had a counter-effect in the sense that the growth of cities into metropolitan centres and the establishment of townships sparked off a massive influx of rural Black people in the cities. It prompted the government to impose tighter controls in terms of movement, settlement and expression. Black artists found themselves not only unable to move freely, but also to express themselves with the freedom that they desired. Van Robbroeck (1998:13) quotes Louis Maqhubela (a contemporary and close friend of Sihlali) who said the following during an interview: “[W]hite artists are at liberty to draw from any source in the universe...[but] as far as Black artists are concerned, it seems everyone has a preconceived idea of how their work should look like...”

Due to the racial context, many Black artists' work was neglected because it was viewed as inferior (Loots in De Jager 2003). Sihlali (in an interview with David Koloane) argued that tutors at the Polly Street Arts Centre exerted pressure on artists to paint in an “expressionistic” manner (cited in Nettleton & Hammond-Tooke 1989:219). Ironically, this was a restriction on their freedom of expression. Thus many artists, poets, writers and

musicians expressed painful experiences of township conditions of oppression, exclusion and separation in various forms of content that contained an overt voice of protest for fear of government reprisals. The envisaged paradise had become a nightmare.

In spite of the fame and recognition that came with the artists' success, artists remained restless, looking for a break that would bring freedom of artistic expression, international recognition, status, fame and wealth. The longing for the fulfilment of these dreams was forged around a utopian faith in the large popular metropolitan cultural centres of the West. This explains the artists' (from all corners of the globe) passionate ambition to exhibit or relocate to cities like Paris and New York. For South African Black artists, this could only be achieved with the help of White patrons. It meant that their movements were monitored and all of it led to some going into exile.

One of the earliest Black South African artists who ventured out of the country was Gerard Sekoto. According to De Jager (1992), after his first one-man exhibition at the Marlborough in Johannesburg, Sekoto's art came to the attention of South African art lovers. Sekoto moved to the famed District Six in Cape Town in 1942 and he moved back to Gauteng (then the Transvaal) in 1945. His main patrons were Jewish intellectuals whose financial support and recognition of his talent enabled him to acquire the means and confidence to leave the country and migrate to Paris in 1947. From 1966 to 1968, he moved to Senegal where he lived for a short period and he then returned to Paris where he died later. Sekoto's early years in Paris were difficult and frustrating, which only confirms the utopianess of metropolitan life – it is not a happy place. The pervasive hopelessness and interiorised inferiority which many Black South Africans experienced in the 1960s and early-1970s accounts for later migrations and exile.

According to De Jager (1992), Dumile Zwelidumile Mxgasi Feni was born in the Cape Province. Before moving to Johannesburg, Feni made a series of movements through various towns in the Western Cape before moving to Queenstown where he relocated as a child. It was only after contracting tuberculosis and his subsequent treatment at the South African National Tuberculosis Association Hospital that he really began to produce his

own work. He first worked with Ephraim Ngatane on murals at the hospital. Later, he received support from a group of intellectuals that included Lionel Abrahams, Bill Ainslie, Barney Simons and Cecil Skotness. At this point, his exhibitions drew the attention of the government which threatened him with relocation to the homeland. Contextually, he had to make a choice between “rural” (home) and metropolitan (foreign). He chose the latter. In 1968 he went abroad and lived for many years in London in self-imposed exile.<sup>11</sup> His occasional visits to the United States led to his eventual migration to New York where he lived until his death in 1991 (Richards 2004).<sup>12</sup>

It is important to note that the restriction on movement was more of a deterrent measure to what seems to be a cultural trait of artists, that of migration and movement. In 1994 when the democratic transformation in South Africa ended the country’s isolation, doors were flung open and free movement in and out of the country became possible. South African artists found themselves free to join other artists in the diaspora. It also gave foreign and previously exiled South African artists the opportunity to come to the country. However, as Enwezor (1998) suggests, migration does not necessarily mean leaving behind one’s own country, culture and ethnic enclave. It involves other forms of travelling that mean more than the physical crossing of borders. Enwezor (1998:2) argues as follow:

[I]t is possible to live in one’s own country, city, and culture and remain as distinctly alienated and distant from its social procedures as those who journey to the strange beyond the global metropolis. This minimally recognized condition of migrancy, placelessness, exile, and displacement serves as a metaphor for what today’s contemporary artists embody. They travel both at home and abroad, journey physically and psychically.

Contextually, these movements include the personal psychical journeys of the mind that propel an artist’s vision beyond the confines of their inhabited geographic *space* and *time*. They tend to be internally bound as the mind proceeds to construct or envision an ideal society from the perspective of an ideal metropolitan set-up that is endowed with

technological sophistication and is characterised by a glamorous social cultural set-up or, in a nostalgic fashion, mourn the lost golden times of the past. This does not only keep the artist in a state of psychological flux but also in a restless nomadic state of physical transit.

A city or metropolis is not just the buildings and structures; it includes the combination of bodies that interact in the built-up environment of urban spaces (Bingaman et al 2002:17). When expressing their utopian/dystopian perceptions regarding the metropolis, modernist artists tend to visualise the idea of *eu topos*, which means “a good place” from the point of view of an ideal glamorous architectural set-up or an ideal architectural set-up that is brought into harmony with its complex technological and socio-cultural interactive processes which find expression in the activities of its inhabitants (Frisby 2001:147). However, besides architecture (which in itself has been proven deceptive), a utopian art work is – in the context of Baker-Smith’s definition (Baker-Smith & Barefoor 1987) – just a model, an *ou-topos*, a representation of an idealised place (not a real place but an imaginary place – a utopia).

The following part of this discussion looks at utopian perceptions of the metropolis as expressed in the works of two African artists, Tommy Motswai (a South African artist) and Bodys Isek Kingelez (an artist from the Democratic Republic of Congo). While Tommy Motswai’s focus is on the need for idealised social cosmopolitan urban interaction, Bodys Isek Kingelez focuses on the need for an idealised architectural environment that is necessary for good living. Both artists focus on the deficiencies that act as a stumbling block to their perception of idealised metropolitan living. The work of Tommy Motswai is discussed first, after which the work of Bodys Isek Kingelez is explored.

## **2.5 TOMMY MOTSWAI’S REFLECTIONS OF UTOPIA**

In the South African context, Motswai’s work spans two concurrent periods: (1) the transition from modernism to postmodernism and (2) the transition of South Africa from an apartheid state to a free non-racial and multicultural democratic society. A closer study

of his work reveals a greater focus on joyous scenes of dance, weddings, festivals, travel, shopping, music, fancy cars and business (see figures 7–12) as reflections of South African metropolitan multicultural life during the period of transition. One of the themes that run through his earlier works is the celebratory joy that comes from metropolitan multicultural interactions (see figures 7 and 10). These are portrayed with repetitive reflection on the excitement and thrill of life in the city centre and the Black townships.

This theme brings to the forefront the issue of *happiness* that is derived from metropolitan *cosmopolitanism* as is it is outspokenly expressed in *Faces at Christmas 1988* (see figure 7). In this work Motswai portrays a scene of joyous multicultural celebration of Christmas in the city. However, the celebrations are expressed as a multicultural, multireligious activity that purports to bring joy to all people irrespective of age, race, sex, colour or religious affiliation. It is in this regard that one thinks of Pollock (cited in Breckenridge, Pollock, Bhabha & Chakrabarty 2002) who states that as a practice, cosmopolitanism is yet to come – something awaiting realisation. This obviously suggests that Motswai’s cosmopolitanism, as expressed at that time, was futurist and therefore utopian because three of its powerful and closely related forces (nationalism, globalisation and multiculturalism – as identified by Pollock) that ought to have been at work were rendered inert by racism, ethnicity and international isolation. The issue of happiness that are expressed in the smiling faces also comes into question because, as Huntley observes, some of them (Muslims and Jews) will not be celebrating Christmas. We also do not know how many Hindus or Communists are in the crowd (Huntley 1992:101). Nevertheless, we are quite convinced that they would not join in the joyous celebrations. As Youngelson-Neal et al (2001:6) observe: “...cosmopolitanism also involves an awareness of a world that is comprised of many cultures; a willingness to question the assumptions of one’s own traditions; and a recognition of cultural relativity and pluralism so long as human rights are not being violated.” At the time when Motswai painted the work (in 1988), human rights violation was enforced by the repressive laws of apartheid which made racism the underlying obstacle to happiness and thereby rendered the metropolis of the time a *ou* that means “not”, a *eu* that means “happy” and a *topos* that means “place” (Bingaman et al 2002:1).

Some of Motswai's work was done in the period (1993–1996) that marked South Africa's transition to a multiracial democracy – a period that filled the previously marginalised communities with wild hopes and optimism for their new and hard-earned democracy. However, this optimism was short-lived because in the preceding years the country (not fully recovered from racism) had been gripped with terror that arose from Black ethnic violence which ravaged the townships and countryside in spells of related taxi and train killings. The image of the train was far from the happy scene in Tommy Motswai's *Township at De Wildt* (1996) (see figure 16) where it is suggested that a train in the background is the bearer of fruits and vegetables that are being happily sought-after at the large retail fruit and vegetable outlet. The train became an emissary of death at the time.

In the city centres itself, the atmosphere was not much different from the previous repressive mood. In an interview with Enwezor, Thomas Mulcaire (1996) commented on the status quo in Johannesburg by saying that although the interaction in terms of the old group areas had *hopefully* passed, it was too late to recuperate or realise social and communicative utopias in the public realm. "Inscriptions still persist. The White cube remains an exclusive area", Mulcaire (1996:54) argued. Enwezor agreed that the idea of the community that he had been looking for only existed in shopping malls. In other words, the idea of happiness as portrayed by Motswai was still a utopian ideal that was aspired for and visualised, but it was not yet realised.

In general Motswai's work repeatedly focuses on township scenes of lowly local street vendors who joyfully go about their business (see figures 13 and 16), celebrations (see figures 12 and 14) that at times parallel the "high business" life of the elite (see figure 11) in the postmodern high-tech corporate world of the city centre. He himself rubs shoulders with the two worlds, his acute observations recording every detail of it but expressing it in a manner that gives it an illusion of joy. According to the editor of *ArtPrintSA* (2006:1), "[w]hat he sees is what is important, and when he puts it down on paper, it is testimony to the joy, excitement and pleasure he sees in the urban world around him". In this respect, what he portrays is more accurately what he perceives.

Most of Tommy Motswai's prints tend to focus on the idea of movement. Motswai himself says: "I like to draw happy people doing ordinary things like travelling on buses, talking and singing in places I know well like Soweto" (*South African history* [Sa]). Whether it is a celebration (as in figure 12), a journey (as in figures 8 and 15) or an event, Motswai likes to capture the bustling activity of people who are in a thrill and excitement of motion, punctuating his scenes with speeding vehicles that all point to the joy, excitement and pleasure of movement in the modern world. While his work echoes the work of the futurist artist who extol metropolitan life and modern industry on the one hand (Arnason 1986), it epitomises the work of the expressionist movement and artists who concentrated on capturing the newness of everyday urban existence, the crowd and the dynamic thrill of the metropolis on the other hand (Frisby 2001:88). Yet it is also true of Motswai's work that it is in alignment with the "popular art" movement where artists dwell on aspects of contemporary popular culture and representation of commercial images (Arnason 1986).

Although Motswai uses a comically expressive way to describe content, one of his subject matters is commercial scenes (see figures 11, 13 and 16). Like many of the images of the American Pop artists of the 1960s, Motswai uses the everyday environment as a source to create new subject matter. But this approach goes a long way back to 1839 when "realist" artist Hanore Daumier concerned himself with all the details of everyday life in Paris and rooted his satire in realistic observation (Arnason 1986:28). Daumier's caricatures reached vast audiences partly because of the development of lithography. In a similar fashion, Motswai uses lithography to make prints of scenes that are drawn from everyday city and township life and evoke humour. The comical simplicity with which the subject matter is detailed with activity is carefully chosen by the artist not only to clearly spell out what he wishes to say<sup>13</sup>, but also to express the joyous mood and humour with which he wants it to be read. His adoption of the comic style echoes the Pop trends of the British artists of the later 1950s whose images were derived from American motion pictures, popular idols and comic strips among other things.

From an African point of view, Motswai's style of rendering images also lends itself to the "popular" art style that is used in Cherry Samba's (of the Democratic Republic of Congo) urban paintings (see figures 17 and 18). Of course, in contrast to Motswai, Samba's work focuses on the negative effects of urbanisation. In his paintings Samba directs a vicious attack on the municipal authority's inefficiency in maintaining public utilities and in their failure to enforce a strict code of social behaviour. For example, figure 17 portrays an overloaded taxi wading through streets that are full of potholes with standing water, while figure 18 illustrates how the residents of Kinsasha contribute to the degradation of the city's hygiene by littering condoms that are then picked by the children who convert them into balloons. The utopia that is overtly expressed in Motswai's work becomes reality in Samba's paintings.

The other difference between these two artists lies in their choice of medium. While Samba uses the traditional acrylic on canvas, Tommy initially used crayon on paper. Tommy's recent work suggests specialisation in lithograph prints. The use of lithography aligns itself more with the commercial aspect of art making as governed by the profit motive. It parallels art with industrial commodities where uniqueness in individuality is watered down by reproduction and simplicity. Viewed in the context of South African visual culture, his use of crayons and lithography detracts from the weight that is given to the other art works which have been executed in mediums that are traditionally accredited by the modernist movements. This affirms its alliance with the work of European and American Pop artists. The Pop artists were greatly influenced by Marcel Duchamp's philosophy of anti-art (Arnason 1986:449)<sup>14</sup>.

Yet in this deviation one finds a unique study and rendering of forms that reveal the artist's acute observation and recording of scenes that purport to express his everyday utopian longings. This is because although these scenes are informed by real observation, from a utopian perspective, they remain dreams that are framed in the utopian mind of their architect. Through their colourful figurative expressionism, their author reveals his longings – an endless, joyous metro-cosmopolitan atmosphere. The mood that they carry detracts from the contemporary realities that encompass them. As such, beyond the

frames of the fragmented scenes of pseudo-happiness lie the contemporary realities of the informal squatter spaces (such as Alexanderia in Johannesburg, Khayalitsha in Cape Town and Ducan Village in East London) that affect the bodies which course through these urban spaces: poverty, unemployment (deriving from social exclusion, particularly among young people), dysfunctional families with poor parenting, domestic violence, parental conflicts, a culture of violence, violent crime, alcohol and drug abuse, discrimination and exclusion (deriving from sexist, racist or other forms of oppression), degradation of urban environments and social bonds that are subconsciously downplayed (Tomlinson et al 2003:103).

The foregoing scenario has found its way into parts of the interior spaces in the hearts of the metropolitan centres, consolidating the deceptiveness of the external panoramic view of the metropolis and affirming its utopianess and the cultural implications of the utopianess. The bipolar cross-cultural acculturation of the city transforms it into a lustreless conglomeration of decaying structures that are inhabited by multifaceted groups of cross-cultural communities. This is very much the reality of what constitutes the heart of present-day South African metropolitan centres like Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town. In his photographic exhibition *Joburg downtown* (2004), Guy Tillim manipulates his medium to record a mood that captures the deplorable conditions which characterise the inner heart of contemporary Johannesburg (Tillim 2004). Indeed, one cannot deny that these adverse conditions are partly attributed to the problems which emanate from utopian-motivated migration and the cross-cultural implications of multiculturalisation. According to Tillim (cited in Gaule 2006:49), “[t]he buildings in Hillbrow were previously occupied by European foreigners, immigrants, many of them with ties to Europe”. Today they are occupied by Black immigrants, partly from South Africa but particularly from other parts of Africa.

What is taking place in Johannesburg is a reflection of a process that is happening in other African metropolitan centres such as Dakar, Cairo, Cape Town and Durban. These cities have become havens to political and economic asylum-seekers from war-torn, economically malaised and/or drought-stricken African countries. Most of these people

place their economic faith in the physical and social character of the metropolis. Here the role of architecture in creating an alluring effect cannot be underestimated. Architecture is perceived as the physical embodiment of security, good living and progress. Historically, early-twentieth-century and mid-twentieth-century architects who shared this view tried to turn their utopian views into projects – only to have everything end in dystopia. However, this did not kill the utopian spirit. To date, the utopian spirit (though feeble) remains alive in certain parts of the world. The following part of this discussion looks at how Bodys Isek Kingelez’s models are allegorical of this spirit.

## **2.6 BODYS KINGELEZ’S METROPOLITAN MODELS OF AN AFRICAN PARADISE**

Like many of the African artists of the period under discussion, Bodys Isek Kingelez’s journey had humble beginnings in the rural village of Kimbembele Ihunga in the Democratic Republic of Congo where, after graduating from secondary school, Kingelez made the capital Kinshasa his home (Bodys Isek Kingelez [Sa] [online biography]). Although Kingelez studied neither art nor architecture, his artistic career is not only an epitome of his migration from a rural area to an urban area but is also allegorical of his transition from the traditional to the modern. After losing his job as a restorer of traditional masks in the national museum of Kinshasa, he turned to model making (culturebase@hke.de 2003:1). Kingelez’s works (see figures 19–22) are cities that are a later development to the models that he began to construct in 1977. His motivation and inspiration to construct these models came from the trying period (1970–1977) that he experienced when Kinshasa became “a sprawling, chaotic, anarchic city that was falling apart” (Bodys Isek Kingelez [Sa]).<sup>15</sup> Since then, Kingelez has dedicated himself to what he calls “architectural modelism”, through which he “aesthetically” and “poetically” questions the human condition by offering a redemptive vision of an idealised city (Bodys Isek Kingelez [Sa]).

In putting forward his utopian models, Kingelez also in a way harps on the imperfect realities of Kinshasa that are partly represented in Cherry Samba’s paintings: the post-

colonial filth of deplorable rural and impoverished urban slums that haunts the ordinary citizens of the Congo. He has created hundreds of models from recycled materials such as paper, cardboard and plastic as constructions of the present, the future and the hopes of an African renewal. His first city was *Kimbembele Ihunga* (see figure 20) which he made in honour of his native village, his dead father and his mother who still lives there. In 1995, he came up with *Villa Fantôme*, in 1997 he produced *Project for the Third Millennium* and in 2000 he made *The City of the Future*. He says: “I wanted my art to serve the community that is being reborn to create a new world, because the pleasures of our earthly world depend on the people who live in it. I created these cities so there would be lasting peace, justice and universal freedom” (Bodys Isek Kingelez [Sa]). It is certainly utopic to imagine that contemporary models can be a solution to societal problems when real housing projects fail. Models express a projected vision which is grounded in the wish that is made to appear real. They are therefore simulations which, in terms of Jean Baudrillard’s theory, are not real because they feign what one lacks. Kingelez’s cities are models of the idealised metropolis which the artist would like to be built (The international artists data base [Sa]). His models of phantom American and African cityscapes (see figures 19 and 20) express his utopian longings for modernist fantastical architecture.

Indeed, the models are futurist in the sense that they are inspired by Western world prototypes that in the context of the contemporary socio-political, economic and cultural climate in Africa, stand out as being futurist. In a way, they parallel Saint Elia’s (1888–1966) plans for the industrial city in which he conceived of cities that were built of the newest materials in terms of the needs of modern man. These ideas were largely monumental visions that remained on the drawing board (Arnason 1986:214). Le Corbusier (1887–1965) published his *Towards a new architecture* in 1920 with the idea of progress in the hope that industrialisation, science and technology would secure a better life for mankind. In pursuit of his ideas, housing projects and clusters of accommodation (blocks of flats, et cetera) were designed by architects to meet the accommodation needs of modern man. The project was counter-productive and what began as a utopia turned into dystopia. Kingelez’s motives have similarities with the

Russian constructivists' deeply held conviction that "the artist could contribute to enhance the physical and intellectual needs of the whole society" (Scharf 1995:160). In the contemporary African context, Kingelez shares a similar view in the hope that his "cities" will help in creating "lasting peace, justice and universal freedom" – on the basis of the history of such projects, this idea is perceptively utopian. Hence, Searle (2002:3) comments that it is "a world that will never be".

Kingelez's models are therefore not only journeys that articulate his personal longings, but are also attestations of many people's silent journeys of utopian fantasy that are often translated into physical migrations to large metropolitan centres in Africa and Europe. People from rural areas, particularly the youth in Africa, tend to think that metropolitan centres are places where they will enjoy comfort, pleasure and lasting peace, but their journeys reveal the contrary.

## **2.7 CONCLUSION**

From the discussion in this chapter, it is clear that psychical and physical migratory movements to metropolitan centres are expressions of utopian perceptions. However, more often than not, utopia turns into dystopia as the migrants fail to realise their dreams. This raises questions about the validity of the utopianess of the contemporary metropolis. The metropolis acts as a melting pot of the interacting multitudes from rural and urban, traditional and modern, and Western and African cultures. This interaction results in the fragmentation of traditional fixed categories and reduces them to a loose assemblage of wholes that remain in a state of flux. This generates a transitory heterogeneity that leads to cultural conflict which makes the idea of utopia/dystopia and its ideal of social progress very subjective. It is this subjectivity that sets the artists off in a nomadic search for a utopia. As Nesbit (2003:327) argues: "Utopia itself has become a no-place, empty rhetoric at best, an exotic vacation, the desert island of the empty cliché."

We live in postmodern times that are characterised by pluralism which supports the recognition of multiculturalism. However, within the nexus of modernity,

multiculturalism denies unitary control of exploitative forces and leads to further complex multicultural differences that support capitalist exploitation and turn all utopian hopes into dystopia.

## NOTES:

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<sup>1</sup> Here the term is used in summative to refer to a multitude of problems that can no longer be limited to informal squatter settlements but include the spread of these problems to certain parts of the city centre and put the lives of the occupants at risk. These problems include high rates of unemployment; insufficient housing and shelter; health and nutritional problems; inadequate sanitation and water supplies; air, water and noise pollution; crime; homelessness; and other social malaise (Dogan & Kasarda John 1988).

<sup>2</sup> Blazwick quotes Raymond Williams who asserted that “Paris, Vienna, Berlin, London, New York took on a silhouette as ... the most appropriate locale for art made by restlessly mobile émigré or exile”(Blazwick 2001:8).

<sup>3</sup> There are a number of factors contributed to the unfavourable conditions that led to the massive rural-urban migration of Blacks during the 1940s, 1950s to the 1960s, namely, their being dispossessed of their land resulting in some being reduced to farm workers and others being pushed to the barren mountainous areas, the droughts and famine of the 1930s and 1940s, and the segregation laws passed thereafter, to mention a few.

<sup>4</sup> As previously discussed in this chapter, traditionally in most of the indigenous African tribes “art” was not practiced as art but was functional in the sense that it was used in the social, cultural and religious cults of the tribe. Freedom to practice art was not restricted as such (except for craft art) but specific people (usually from a particular clan or family) were chosen to produce art works that would serve the socio-cultural and religious functions in the society. Other members of the tribe who had artistic ability and potential were therefore rendered redundant and had to succumb to the careers which the tribe dictated for them. It was only after the missionary schools opened that Africans who trained in Western ways of art making were given the opportunity to become professional artists.

<sup>5</sup> Their outspoken expression of defiance and protest would lead to political arrest and detention.

<sup>6</sup> “Millennial beliefs are known to occur most frequently among the powerless groups – i.e. groups which perceive themselves, often correctly, as unable to exert control over the course of history without divine intervention” (Levitas 1990:194).

<sup>7</sup> Julian Motau. *Mother Africa* (1968). Charcoal on paper. 185 cm x 172 cm. (No collection reference available.)

<sup>8</sup> After study in Brussels, the Hague and Antwerp, Vincent Van Gogh migrated to Paris; Paul Klee (1879–1940) (born in Switzerland) studied in Munich, after which he travelled extensively between Italy and France between 1905 and 1907; Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) – one of the remarkable artists of the twentieth century – received most of his training in Barcelona, but (like all of his young colleagues) had a passionate ambition to go to Paris and in the year 1900 he made his first excursion to the city; Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) was trained in the Amsterdam Academy but in 1911 he left Holland for Paris, which happened to be

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the art “capital” of Europe at the time; a year after World War I began, Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp left for New York (which was later to become the metropolitan centre of modern art).

<sup>9</sup> According to Todd and Wheeler (1978), “utopia” may however be interpreted as a response to present history, in particular to anxieties and pessimistic perspectives and the unsatisfied hopes and dreams of people. This response reveals the imperfection and inadequacy of the existing status quo through a longing for a romanticised “ideal” (1978:7).

<sup>10</sup> “[T]ownships were conceived as temporary residences to provide labour pools for the factories and mines, and rigidly implemented pass laws ensured that few migrants could settle there permanently without breaking the law” (Van Robbroeck 1998:4).

<sup>11</sup> Feni wanted to travel and meet other artists. He intended to leave South Africa only for a short period but, sadly, this did not happen. His mission was to soar above the earth on the wings of his dream and to express his vision. (Maart, B in the *Mail & Guardianonline*, 26 January 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Other artists who opted for self-exile in Western metropolitan centres included Louis Maqhubela, Azaria Mbatha and Ernest Mancoba (De Jager 1992). In spite of restricted movement, Durant Sihlali (1935–2004) was among the artists who had the opportunity to travel extensively. After training and gaining experience in various mediums, Sihlali undertook an overseas study tour in 1981 and visited Athens in Greece and Palermo in Sicily. He studied on a French Government travel scholarship in France at the Villa Arson Art School in Nice from 1985 to 1986. Although exile was not part of his experience, “when speaking to him it was clear that apartheid forced a painful internal exile and a sense of homelessness on him and his compatriots” (Richards, C in *Mail & Guardianonline*, 21 May 2004).

<sup>13</sup> When reading Motswai’s work, one has to bear in mind that Motswai is deaf. He uses his images to say what he would have spoken in the most explicit manner and thereby also expresses his mood (humorous) and thoughts.

<sup>14</sup> Artists such as Richard Hamilton (1922–present) are recorded to have been great disciples of Duchamp (Arnason 1986:448-449).

<sup>15</sup> Over the next seven years, he studied part time by supporting himself through teaching. During this period, the country went into economic decline under the dictatorial leadership of President Joseph Mobutu.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **UTOPIA/DYSTOPIA: REFLECTIONS OF URBAN MULTICULTURALISM AND DYSTOPIA IN THE WORKS OF DANIEL MOSAKO, SANTU MOFOKENG AND MOSHEKWA LANGA**

#### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter discusses how modernist and postmodernist utopian and dystopian thinking has promoted multiculturalism in Black African societies, thereby making it difficult for them to speed up cultural projects that can help to enhance general social welfare and "progress". According to Collins (1989:2), multiculturalism is a contemporary cultural crisis: culture is no longer a fixed category but a continuous process of decentring and assemblage of conflicting voices and institutions. One can posit that with cultural conflict and fragmentation in place, the idea of "progress" becomes subjective. It becomes both utopian and dystopian, depending on the constitution of the cultural dispensation.

Collins (1989) observes that despite an awareness of the cultural crisis, few attempts have been made to develop new models of cultural analysis to account for the situation. In the case of Africa, little attention has been paid to the question of pre-modern (rural) utopian and dystopian modes of thinking and how the changing modernist and postmodernist climate has affected this thinking to precipitate the status quo.

One of the more fascinating revolutionary developments of twentieth-century utopian thinking is the contemporary metropolis. As a symbol of modernity, the metropolis not only bears testimony to the achievements of scientific and technological developments but also renders them crucial to understanding the utopian/dystopian effect of the city in promoting multiculturalism. The development of the modern metropolis as a cultural phenomenon is rooted in the twentieth-century utopian schemes that were initially driven by a noble quest for adequate social living conditions for modern societies. But these schemes became counter-productive as capitalists exploited them to aggravate the already strained unequal social relations. In Africa the enlightenment project turned out to be a

colonising mission that rendered the modernity project and its modern metropolis paradoxically utopian and dystopian. It is this dual nature of the metropolis that ferments cultural processes which culminate in multiculturalism.

For the purposes of this study, the focus of this chapter therefore falls on the utopian/dystopian role of the metropolis in fermenting multiculturalism to the detriment of the underprivileged masses. The works of three contemporary South African artists (Daniel Mosako, Santu Mofokeng and Moshekwa Langa) are examined. Their works reflect the temporal-spatial, physical and socio-cultural aspects of the contemporary metropolis that promote multiculturalism to the detriment of unitary social progress. In the previous chapters of this study, various aspects of utopia/dystopia were dealt with together with its origin and definitions and the conditions for it. These aspects are not repeated in this chapter.

This chapter is divided into three sections: In the first section, the discussion focuses on the relationship between utopia/dystopia and multiculturalism. In the second section, the relationship between these two phenomena is examined in the African context. This section also looks at the reflections of multiculturalism in the works of Daniel Mosako, Santu Mofokeng and Moshekwa Langa. The third section serves as the conclusion of this chapter.

### **3.2 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN UTOPIA/DYSTOPIA AND MULTICULTURALISM**

Until recently, utopia/dystopia and multiculturalism have been treated as separate fields of study – a situation that has made it difficult to synthesise the influence that the one might have on the other in the field of socio-cultural studies. This can be attributed to two factors: Firstly, utopian studies are predicated on restrictively narrow and outmoded theories which are grounded in the emerging ideological cultural conflicts that characterised Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Secondly, the concept of culture is a dynamic multifaceted phenomenon that has been changing in definition with

the changes in the processes of social change. It is therefore difficult to synthesise the two fields of study in the context of contemporary cultural implications. If we do a closer analysis of the utopian/dystopian ideal and analyse it in the framework of the processes that govern cultural production and consumption, the analysis will shed a better light on how cultural fragmentation and assemblage can be initiated and how it occurs.

The virtue of utopia and dystopia embodies an ideal that encourages social “progress”. However, “progress” is a subjective concept that depends on what a particular society generally construes as the ideal form of the society that has to be pursued. Ideally, both development and progress imply positive change, but change does not necessarily imply progress. According to Robins and Webster (1999:48):

This mythology of “progress” draws some of its appeal from conflating the concepts of change, development and progress. While “change” is indeterminate and open ended, “development” implies a positive direction (as opposed to simply dissolution or chaos), and “progress” even more strongly implies an “enlightened” way forward. In the modern period, change has seemed to be primarily a consequence of scientific and technological innovation...And it has been the values of science and technology that have informed our interpretation of change as social progress.

The fact that culture is a dynamic phenomenon implies that it is susceptible to change; however, whether this change is an “enlightened way forward” or a regression is a matter that has to be decided by the affected group or society to which the culture belongs. The possibility of “negative” change will most certainly imply denial of progress. In this instance, as in the case of most rural African societies, progress would necessitate resisting change; it would mean preserving the norms, culture and traditions that inform the identity of the tribe or even a recovery of a lost “golden age”. William (1975:10), commenting on the status quo as the period that characterises the transition from modernist to postmodernist trends, states that “[i]t is a remarkable feature of industrial capitalism that, throughout the transforming experiences of the past three centuries, the

ideas of rural life have ‘persisted with extraordinary power’”. It is this continuing conservatism that has sanctioned the categorisation of folk cultures as "fixed". Yet, in its "fixity", culture remains relatively dynamic and is guided by the internal processes of change that are rooted in the changes in utopian/dystopian thinking. It is these changes that ferment conflicts and unveil differences that render the society susceptible to fragmentation. Some of these processes are discussed in the following paragraph.

The construction of imaginary worlds, free from the difficulties that beset us in reality, can take place in different forms in the same society. The differences in the aspirations from within and between different groups make the notions of utopia and dystopia paradoxically unstable and subjective. Kumar (cited in Levitas 1990:139) reiterates this paradoxical stance when he states that “the optimism of utopia and the pessimism of dystopia represent opposite sides of the same coin – the hope of what the future could be at best, the fear of what it may be at worst”. In effect, what appears as utopian from one perspective is capable of being perceived as dystopian from another. Our perceptions of what is a utopian or dystopian world can vary from individual to individual, group to group or society to society. In the same way, an individual is simultaneously capable of harbouring both utopian and dystopian perceptions of the world. This dual conflicting and paradoxical stance of the utopian/dystopian mode also renders culture susceptible to fragmentation. Even if a group reaches consensus about what is idealised as the perfect world, dissension as to the means whereby that world should be realised will most certainly yield the same results. Conflict in the meaning-making processes can lead to cultural fragmentation. If it does not lead to cultural fragmentation, it will at best give rise to processes that will kick-start such fragmentation. Multiculturalism can also arise (from within and from without) when different "unitary" societies that subscribe to different utopian/dystopian ideologies come in contact with each other, thus leading to conflictive heterogeneity of cultural production (Ziegler 1942:16). This accounts for the different theoretical categorisations of utopias that were encountered in the field study of this topic.<sup>1</sup>

### **3.3 UTOPIA/DYSTOPIA AND MULTICULTURALISM IN BLACK AFRICAN SOCIETIES**

The origins of multiculturalism in indigenous African societies are associated with colonialism which was in itself motivated by the romantic utopian notion of and/or search for the unspoilt, uncontaminated and unclaimed (rural) land that is visualised in the Biblical Garden of Eden or Canaan. The colonialists' search brought them in contact with the indigenous rural tribes over whom they established a political hegemony. Throughout the nineteenth century, the colonial powers sought to obliterate the indigenous cultural identities in their domains. As indicated in chapter 1 of this study, colonialism was met with an unusually strong resistance from the indigenous tribes. It was not until after the industrial revolution, when new forms of imperialism were introduced, that cracks in the armour of folk culture became apparent. This was because even though colonialists assumed a racial, intellectual and spiritual superiority over the natives, the effects of imperialism were in some measure beneficial to the indigenous population. Thus, by the twentieth century, colonialists had paved a way for communicating ideas of modernism that would be assimilated and deployed by post-colonial societies in the creation of new national identities. The introduction of modernism that is epitomised in the modern city to a great extent gave credibility to the newcomers' overbearing claims of religious and socio-economic superiority. It led to the conception of a new utopian thinking that would lead to the breakdown of traditional forms of life, the disruption of native civilisation, and the imposition of new religious beliefs and social values.

The origins of multiculturalism are therefore directly related to religious infiltrations and the colonial institution of the Western imperialist and capitalist ideology that was defined by the European philosophy of enlightenment. According to Amin (1977:91), "[t]his philosophy is based on a tradition of mechanistic materialism which postulates a series of chains of specific causal determinations. The chief of these is that science and technology by their (autonomous) progress determine every sphere of social life, transforming social relations in the process." Science and technology not only became key measures of "truth"<sup>2</sup> but also determinants of social "progress" – an ideal that is central to utopian

thinking in every society. However, the religious ideology was not completely abandoned. To counter the contradictions that arose out of religious preaching and political activity, the colonisers conflated certain aspects of religious ideology into the capitalist ideology. The contradictions were given derogatory meanings to put them in line with the capitalist agenda. The effect of this act can be discerned from instances such as the native perception of the biblical city of Jerusalem in the image of the physical aspect of the modern city. The attempt to reconcile the different repertoires of native utopias/dystopias with the Western religious and modernist utopia resulted in complex economic, political, social and cultural interactive processes which culminated in multiculturalism. At the heart of all these processes is the aspect of the Western metropolis which not only bears testimony to the utopian achievements of science and technology but also to its dystopian realities.

The metropolis exerts both a centrifugal and a centripetal utopian impact on African folk societies, influencing them to change their traditional rural lifestyles and prompting diverse multitudes of them to flood urban centres on the continent and to move from those centres to Western metropolitan centres in search of better prospects. This process is crucial in understanding the utopian nature of the contemporary metropolis. It underscores a key aspect of urban experience (mobility) and undercuts any fixed notion of “Africanness” (Allara 2001:1).

For many of the indigenous African societies, migration to the city promises two things: (1) freedom from the rural bondage of tribal myths-enforced tradition and (2) better prospects in the city. However, not long after their quest to migrate from the rural to the urban, the migrants find themselves enmeshed in the struggle to cope with the complex challenges of the new social spatial phenomena. Blazwick (2001:8) argues that “within the metropolis, assumptions of a shared history, language or culture may not apply. Encounters of difference offer the possibility of discarding the past, the familiar, the traditional; assumptions of one’s culture and identity as naturally given can be undermined, made seem contingent and ripe for intervention.” The city/metropolis can allow one to exercise one's freedom, but it can also determine the extent to which and

context within which such freedom can be exercised. Harvey (1990:5) argues that “[c]ities unlike villages and small towns are plastic by nature. We mould them in our images: they in turn shape us by [the] resistance they offer when we try to impose our own personal form on them.”

Because of the diverse cultural institutions in the city with which we interact, we find ourselves compelled to negotiate our dreams on its terms. In this way, we find ourselves constrained to abandon many aspects of our traditional unitary cultural forms and succumb to the alluring forces of assemblage of those that are appropriated from within the multitude of our interactive range. The idea is to fit in with the city’s unique forms of spatial organisation.

In a capitalist system of production, fragmentation is manifested in many different forms of cultural production and consumption. According to Harvey (1990:104-105), participation in market exchange processes presupposes a certain division of labour and a capacity to (alienate) one’s self from one’s own product. The result is an estrangement from the product, fragmentation of social tasks and separation from the subjective meaning of a process of production. Marx (1967: 341) talks of capitalist means of production transforming themselves into means of domination and exploitation that fragment the labourer to a level of degradation – that of being an appendage to a machine. This is not to mention the fragmentation that results from leisure interactive processes that go hand-in-hand with popular culture and the excesses of the techno-cultural revolution that is making an impact on people from all walks of life. In the end, rural social life and a stable homogeneity is replaced with a dynamic individualist heterogeneity.

Yet, within this postmodern diversity of forms runs a dominant strain of homogeneity: a consumer society that has assumed a central systematic role in the reproduction of the capitalist society (Clarke 2003). This explains why, over the last two decades, utopia has been both attacked and co-opted. It has been conflated with materialist satisfaction and has been commoditised and devalued. According to Baccolini (2004:518), “in a society

where consumerism has come to represent the contemporary modality of happiness, utopia has become an outmoded value. The pursuit of individual happiness, which is none other than the material success". Genuine utopia has been replaced with dystopia. Yet, the utopian spirit about the metropolis is still very much alive among the rural societies of Africa. For example, multitudes of indigenous rural Black people from within South Africa and from across the country's borders (mostly unskilled) still flood the metropolitan centres of the country in search of jobs and a better livelihood. The cultural implications of this labour migration form part of the focus of Daniel Mosako's *Constructions*. Mosako's work reflects multiculturalism from a structural and architectural point of view of urban space that is characterised by interstitial transition from squatter settlements in the foreground to skyscrapers in the background.

### **3.4 REFLECTIONS OF MULTICULTURALISM AND ITS DYSTOPIAN EFFECTS IN DANIEL MOSAKO'S *CONSTRUCTIONS***

Mosako's work is about the reactions of the people who migrate to the city and how they adopt to this environment. Adopting a non-figurative approach, Mosako reproduces the metropolis in various forms of *constructions* that speak about the cultural conflicts that arise from migration and the multicultural implications of the conflict between the two spatial domains. Mosako's work is also concerned with the deplorable socio-economic conditions that an ordinary rural–urban Black South Africa migrant faces in the contemporary South African metropolis. He explores the multicultural phenomenon both in process and in content, attributing the current state of affairs to the utopian/dystopian aspect of the city (see figures 23, 24 and 25).

As stated previously, it is the utopian nature of the metropolis that drives people to abandon their serene folk life in the countryside to search for better prospects in the city. However, for Mosako, the roots of the cultural status quo do not begin with urbanisation but are embedded in the spatial conflicts which characterise the histories of invasions and counter-invasions of the rural–urban phenomenon that are embraced in the broader cultural conflicts between European and African and modern and traditional respectively.

He adopts a multicultural multimedia layering and painting process that traces these rural–urban and urban–rural invasions to explain how the two-way interactive processes account for the development of the contemporary cultural status quo.

Mosako begins with a white canvas that is stretched on a frame of local wood to represent the initial invasion (that is, the colonial invasion through which the cityscape invaded the rural landscape of Africa). The spatial conflict that ensued led to the spatial displacement of the rural landscape in the sites where the cities were built and therefore the "White" canvas symbolises the initial displacement and obliteration of traditional culture by (Western) modern culture. These processes played a role in initiating the fragmentation of indigenous traditional cultures.

Through its utopian influence, the city entices the rural dwellers to migrate to the cities to exchange their labour for money. Mosako documents this process by layering a "bark cloth" that he obtained from Uganda on the white canvas. Both the canvas and the bark cloth are representations of material culture: the bark cloth symbolises the traditional indigenous African culture while the white canvas symbolises modern Western culture. The colour contrast between the two has racial tones, while the layering or collageing process is not only symbolic of the interactive process between the two races but also of the different cultural societies that are represented by the two cultural domains. In applying tones of oil colour on the layered surface, Mosako expresses the multicultural effect of these interactive processes. He reiterates this idea when he states that “[c]olours are deliberately metaphorically used to express the contemporary multicultural aspect of the city – a melting pot of cultures”.<sup>3</sup> However, one can discern more reflections from his process than what he expresses verbally. According to Derrida (cited in Harvey 1990:51), collage/montage is the primary form of postmodern discourse: the “inherent heterogeneity of that (be it in painting, writing, architecture) stimulates us the readers of the visual text or image ‘to produce a signification which could be neither univocal nor stable’”. Both producers and consumers of texts participate in the production of signification and meaning. Thus more embedded meanings seem to surface in Mosako’s work.

The use of oil colour in Mosako's work has its own cultural dimensions in the sense that *oil* colour as a Western medium is associated with the realm of high art. It speaks to the undue influence of Western "high" culture on the turn of events that governs cultural production in the city. The term "oil" in this context is also a pun that refers to two modes of cultural production: (1) oil paint as a medium of cultural production and (2) oil as a slippery viscous substance that is associated with machines in industrial production/mass culture. The preceding discussion already explained how the capitalist means of production fragments the labourer to a level of degradation – that of being an appendage to a machine. The unhealthy relationship between the capitalists and the Black labourer is one of the themes that run through Mosako's constructions. This is suggested in various ways, for example in the congestion that suggests a population explosion or in the differences in the form of the structures and the different ways in which Mosako deals with the spatial arrangement of the structures.

In figures 26 and 27 Mosako portrays construction in progress, with the construction machinery and tools representing the working class while the structures that are being constructed represent the capitalists (as the owners of both means of production) who exploit the workers for their own selfish gains. One of the main principles of capitalist production is the division of labour. Division of labour in the workshop implies "the undisputed authority of the capitalist over men, that are parts of a mechanism that belongs to him" (Harvey 1990:105). The interactive process between the two is one of bondage that leads to fragmentation. The harder they work, the wealthier and more elevated in status the capitalist becomes and the wider the gap between them grows. Yet, as we see in figures 23 and 24, the *fragmentation* and *construction* (assemblage) that continues in the two domains lead to heterogeneity of structural forms of cultural expression. These derive from the different interactive processes between and within each domain. According to Roberts K, Cook FG, Clark SC, & Semeonoff (1977), the working class is splintered by numerous cross-cutting internal divisions. Some are hierarchical as between different levels of skill, while others are lateral as between different but equally skilled traders. In the same breadth, Collins (1989:39) argues as follow:

To abandon the “dominant culture” as an archaic concept does not mean that cultural domination is not still at work or that the dominant classes do not really exist in specific social formations. It simply means that domination is conducted by a multiplicity of agencies and the dominant social class has no monopoly over that process.

The two suggest that fragmentation does not only take place in the working class but also in the capitalist domain. This is expressed clearly in figure 24 where the multiplicity of structures almost blurs the line of distinction between the dominant class and the working class. The informal squatter settlements in the foreground slowly merge into dignified architectural forms as one shifts one's gaze towards the skyscrapers on the distant horizon. The difference between the informal squatter settlements in the foreground and the skyscrapers on the horizon is clearly visible.

Apart from the hierarchical difference, there is very little in Mosako's *Constructions* that express the utopian aspect of the city. Through his hazy expressionistic strokes, the city loses its utopian quality as a sparkling diamond. Mosako (2007:1) confirms this by stating: “I have often used hazy colours as an attempt to symbolise the African's life and social circumstances, i.e. the social and political confusion that many Black South Africans are confronted with.” As one moves one's gaze, one becomes part of the spatial confusion. Perspective enables us to realise the contrast between the utopian "outer space", the space that we inhabit and our "internal space" (that is, the space of experience within ourselves). Mosako expresses this as a utopian/dystopian mode. In a personal interview with him (2007),<sup>4</sup> he stated: “The city is an attraction that has got its own baggage. The classy city which attracted the same people is the same city trying to get rid of them.” Somehow, the people are at the crossroads of cultural definition: Acceptance and rejection in some cases generates anxiety and scepticism that drive people to faithfully hold on to the surviving aspects of their culture and heritage. According to Mosako, this is represented in the circular, triangular, rectangular and square designs and patterns in decorative colours that refer to the mural decorations of the traditional African

heritage. They are symbolic representations of aspects of indigenous culture and traditions that some ordinary urbanised Black people still try to hold onto (see figure 25).

In figures 28 and 29 the artist seems to be exploring the status quo of cultural definition given that fragmentation appears to have obliterated all recognisable forms of previously existing unitary forms. We can hardly comprehend ourselves in the context of the signified structural forms so that we can be capable of defining our cultural orientation. Perhaps the artist is reiterating the enormous impact of technological revolution on culture which Rutsky (1999:8) describes as an “unsettling, generative process, which continually breaks elements free of their previous context and recombines them in different ways”. The speed with which this process takes place puts us in a continuous state of flux so that we cannot concretise or stabilise ourselves to reflect on who we really are. Besides, with the emergency of virtual reality, technology has rendered the question of reality so incomprehensible that we become incapable of turning our utopian dreams into reality, let alone speed up cultural projects that can help to enhance general social welfare and "progress". For the underprivileged, utopia has become fragmented and outmoded, leaving the dystopian mode to prevail. The dystopian mode is clearly discernable in the photographic prints of Santu Mofokeng.

### **3.5 REFLECTIONS OF MULTICULTURALISM AND URBAN DYSTOPIA IN SANTU MOFOKENG’S WORK**

Since the end of the nineteenth century, many of the literary and visual art works that deal with the notion of utopia express a fascination with the aesthetic, scientific and technological achievements of the modern and postmodern machine culture as epitomised in the aspect of the modern metropolis. However, as has already been shown, these achievements are a product of various forms and hierarchies of unequal capitalist production relations that are characterised by domination and exploitation which reduce the labourer to the level of being an appendage to a machine. In consequence, the dream worlds of modernity become dangerous because their enormous energy is used instrumentally by the structures of power and mobilised as an instrument of force that

turns against the very masses who were supposed to benefit from it (Buck-Morss 2000:xiii). Privileged political, social and cultural groups prey on the widely accepted traditional forms of "difference" (gender, race, class and age) to legitimise "their" economic domination and exploitation and the oppression of "others". However, as Rutherford (1990:10) observes:

...cultural politics that can address difference offers a way of breaking these hierarchies and dismantling this language of polarity and its material structures of inequality and discrimination...it can be a jumping-off point for assembling new practices and languages, pulling together a diversity of theories, politics, cultural experiences and identities into new alliances and movements.

In effect, the cultural politics of difference becomes a source of cultural fragmentation and assemblage of new cultural forms.

Mofokeng captures this fragmentation in a variety of incongruous black and white photograph prints of rural landscapes and township life (figure 30) that reiterate the adverse realities of the Western incursion into the indigenous rural African's life. In a *Going Home* (1990), a photographic essay that was compiled by him and Paul Weinberg, the artists explore the stark contrast of what going home meant to each of them. Mofokeng states the following about the project: I have tried to plot my growing up – the environment, the people, their customs and rites, and their attitude to life. I am a metaphor of their experiences and their frustrations (Mofokeng & Weinberg 1990:102).

Mofokeng's earlier photographs are all modelled on the experiences and frustrations of township life during the apartheid period. His photographs reveal some of these experiences with emphatic irony: a shack-dweller comes home from work to find his home demolished and the material confiscated by municipal police (figure 30); a giant Omo washing powder advertisement promises better cleanliness where it hangs across a desolate township street (figure 31) – it should probably be read as referring to a forceful intent to wipe the area clean of its informal structures and residents; the image of a

limbless doll with a head, lifelessly wrapped as if in death, hangs from the rim of a tin outside a patchy corrugated shack (figure 32) shows that the dehumanisation of the shack occupant is akin to the condition of the doll outside.

The black and white medium speaks of the past: the memory recalling the bitterness of the experiences. Yet in spite of post-apartheid projects for social transformation, the structural souvenirs that can be seen in figure 32 continue to mushroom and prevail. This only serves to question the validity of the popular voice that lays the blame entirely on apartheid, ignoring the underlying socio-economic forces that influence unequal exchange relations on the grounds of cultural difference. In this respect, racism emerges only as a cardinal means and not as an end in itself. The underlying motivations cannot be attributed to racism only, but also seem to be grounded in selfish materialist aims that are rooted in the binary constructions of differences that are constituted in race, gender, tribe and class and that operate within the utopian/dystopian framework of the modern metropolis. Bhabha observes that "[t]he very concepts of homogeneous national cultures, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or "organic" ethnic communities – as the grounds of cultural comparativism – are in a profound process of redefinition" (1994:7) and refers to "[t]he move away from singularities of 'class' or 'gender' as primary conceptual and organizational categories' that has resulted in an awareness of the subject positions – of race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation – that inhibit any claim to identity [cultural identity inclusive] in the modern world" (1994:2)..

These subject positions have emerged as complex cultural forms that subscribe to the view of the contemporary world as a multicultural phenomenon. Ironically, the unstable nature of this multiculturalism only stands in the way of social progress that ends up yielding further dystopia. On the subject of the utopian/dystopian nature of modernity and the modern metropolis, Rutherford (1990:24) argues that "[m]odern life ascribes to us a multiplicity of subject positions and potential identities which hold the prospects for historically unparalleled human development, but they also represent a predicament that

threatens fragmentation and psychosis terrifying in their lack of personal, collective and moral boundaries”.

The consequence is a conflict of interests that initiates complex processes of integration on the one hand and alienation on the other hand, creating a multiplicity of cultural forms that are in relatively unstable hierarchical positions. Those at the extreme *margins* of alienation and poverty have to keep harping at the *centre*, maintaining their incessant cries for redress. Some of these cries can assume the voice of visual cultural representation. Bhabha (1994:3) observes that “the articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, ongoing negotiation that seeks to authorise cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation”. In the wake of South Africa’s programme for social transformation, Mofokeng's photographs (past and present) retain their call with an aura of dystopian hope.

His photographs become poetic visual evidence of the dystopian realities that Black people who occupy the margins of the spaces of transition from rural to urban culture face. Maurice and Warne (2007:1) describe the photographs “as a visual journey into the dark side of human experience”. Mofokeng’s strength lies in his ability to capture early morning light with optical infiltration of drama that creates a lonely and broody atmosphere: a bare mud hut, a bicycle, a chicken and a boy become poetic subjects of poverty (figure 33), a homeless mother with a baby (probably after forceful removal from or the demolition of her shack), left with the bare minimal of her household belongings, resorts to living in the open bushy fringes of the wilderness (figure 34), an aged man with a wrinkled face struggles to decipher meaning from writings in a book which is a physical allegory of the alienation, loneliness and sadness that comes with aging (figure 35).

The images are subtle representations of the adverse interactive effects of the social forces of the machine culture, societies, landscape and spatial agency. Through these images, Mofokeng perceives the contemporary transition to the postmodern in the context of memories of the diabolical past, suggesting that not much has changed. He uses the

advertising billboards to capture the subtle utopian mockeries that modernity throws (through the metropolitan agency) at its victims as they try to come to terms with the demands of its adverse realities. The advertising billboards as agencies of technological advancement form part of the utopian facets of the cotemporary metropolis.

Mofokeng draws much of the content of his art from township scenes and captures images that allude to Dreyer's (2005) reference to TS Elliot's description of the dystopian metropolis in *The Wasteland*: "...the ruins of Western civilisation are depicted comprising perverse personae, sexual dysfunction, social alienation, spiritual despondency, and so on." Figures 30 to 33 are a clear expression of perverse personae. In *Condom Billboard*<sup>5</sup> sexual dysfunction is reflected in the representation of a model in latex: The "-ex" in the word "sex" is isolated visually, presented in a circle and placed over the genitals of the model (Maart 2004:69). The "-ex" functions as a lamentation of a bygone past which was filled with the ideals and traditional moral values that are attached to sex in African indigenous traditional cultures.

In figures 36 and 37, Mofokeng again employs his use of dramatic light to conjure a mood of lonely despondency, rejection and alienation. The images find description in Levine's *Alienation in the metropolis* (1977). Levine attributes the source of this condition to the breaking of the interpersonal peace treaty that applies to human action. He argues:

[W]hen despair, disgust, cynicism and estrangement are the patterned effects and liabilities that dominate the emotional climate of a society, the normative and structural attachments between people are undermined and the foundations of communal existence are eroded. Severed from the ties and rhythms of [rural] social life, the individual confronts a stark reality: a huge mysterious and seemingly senseless universe in which his rather short biography unfolds (Levine 1977:1).<sup>6</sup>

In such situations, humans tend to be desperate. They tend to engage in what Goodwin (1978) sees as the primary function of utopia: that of constructive criticism of the present with reference to the hypothetical future. And when nothing seems to come of this, they normally resort to spiritual invocation. In the field of utopian/dystopian studies, spiritual invocation is manifested as central to the processes that define millennial beliefs. Millennial beliefs are known to occur most frequently among powerless groups (that is, groups that perceive themselves – often correctly – as being unable to exert control over the course of history without divine intervention) (Levitas 1990:194). Those who subscribe to these beliefs tend to seek solace in the hope that their earthly dystopian experiences are temporal because divine intervention can miraculously change the course of their fate to fortunes or, at best, will reward them with a better life when they die. In the true sense of the word "dystopia", these beliefs are symptomatic of a dystopian strain.

Mofokeng's church images reflect these beliefs. Early representations of these invocations can be seen in his "Train Church" images (figures 38 and 39) that were taken at the height of the political unrest of the 1980s. Law-Viljoen ([Sa]:1) intimates:

These itinerant churches were partly a response to the strains of commuting forced upon millions of South Africans: the rising in the dark, the long journey to places of work, the return home late at night...train churches may also be seen as an attempt...to create a space for rituals of worship within the constraints of forced movement.

In other words, trains gave diverse communities the opportunity to congregate and seek divine intervention at the time of hardship and oppression. The spiritual atmosphere of the train is both a reminder of oppression and a source of hope for divine intervention. The train therefore does not only assume a dystopian role but also a utopian one. It serves as a conduit of conflicting and assimilatory cultural processes between the various polarised domains of cultural definition.

After the democratic transformation (ten years after documenting *Train Church*), Mofokeng noted, recorded and began to document an ongoing project of religious ceremonies that were no longer taking place in trains only but had infiltrated the caves, public parks, vacant lots and underside of highway overpasses. It is in these works that one can see the fragmentary impact of urban culture on the rural-traditional, social, cultural, economic and religious beliefs of indigenous Black people. Mofokeng (cited in Law-Viljoen 2008) suggests that such practices (as those represented in *Chasing Shadows*: figure 40) signal a tendency to seek answers to social, political [and economic] problems in God or the ancestors. The question that is justifiably raised by Law-Viljoen is: How will spiritual invocation translate into political [social or economic] efficacy? Surely merging certain aspects of the spiritual ancestor religion with Christianity faith only leads to further fragmentation of both urban and indigenous rural cultures. With the possibility of the desires of the myriads of fragmented groups being in conflict, how will reconciliation be attained without becoming embroiled in a cultural politics of identity? It is difficult to find answers to these questions. In the end, the religious rituals and practices such as those at Motouleng are tantamount to "chasing shadows". The spiritual reclaiming of space in the context of a redefinition of the self makes the conception of space as "real" an impossibility. Thus Paul Celan (cited in Santu Mofokeng 2008:1) gives figure 41 the title *Where did the road lead when it led nowhere*: an old railway line that began as a single entity eventually breaks into branches that disappear on the misty horizon, leading to nowhere – marking the end of utopia and leaving us in suspense and fear of what the future holds (dystopia).

### **3.6 MULTICULTURALISM AND THE DYSTOPIAN MOOD IN MOSHEKWA LANGA'S WORK**

Moshekwa Langa's works occupy the interstitial frames of his diasporic transition from rural KwaNdebele to urban Johannesburg and his subsequent departure to Amsterdam, where he now lives. Although the artist does not discuss many of his pieces, his physical and conceptual journey reveals a general preoccupation with issues that affect Third World post-colonial artists who migrate to urban centres and from these centres to the

West. These issues include otherness, abandonment, expatriation and identity. Viewed in the context of South African history, one cannot help to see that the work exudes a mood of trauma which is associated with the pervasive themes of racism, dislocation, displacement and alienation. These themes, analysed in terms of the shifts in the contextual framework that governs the production of his work (movement, time and place), serve as a frame of reference for understanding how multiculturalism and utopian/dystopian aspects are reflected in the work.

Langa develops his work from the material he finds in the environment where he happens to be when he begins the act of creating. He uses a wide range of materials and media, including string, photography, drawings, collage, video and painting – all on a need and found basis (The Renaissance Society 1999:1). His earlier works were done at his rural homestead (for example *Skins*, figure 42) and are dominated by the use of discarded materials such as ripped-open cement paper bags, Vaseline, turpentine, creosote, cigarette butts, tea, motor oil, sand and other material that were part of his everyday environment. “I pick it off the street and from dumps” Langa says of the throw-away materials that he uses (cited in Williamson & Jamal 1996:88). His choice of these materials speaks of his “otherness”: a state of deprivation that defines the meaning of not having in the African context. In a statement titled “Moshekwa Langa” accompanying Moshekwa Langa’s exhibition: *Interior Monologue* 22 November 2003 – 25 February 2004 (Contemporary Arts Centre Cicinanti) Langa is quoted confessing: “when I started to show my work, I felt forced to talk about the experience of ‘otherness’ rather than a gesture, which is really what interests me” (2003–2004:1). This explains why he works with poignant images that are tinged with melancholy.

In figure 42, Langa’s transformation of cement bags into surrogate skins (using pungent chemicals in the form of industrial waste products) speaks of the impact of modernity on local tradition – the invasion of the rural area by the city. The skins could as well have spoken of massive slaughter but given the value that is attached to reared animals in indigenous African societies, massive slaughter is contrary to the controlled ceremonial slaughter that they practice. The art work therefore alludes to the adverse impact of

modernity (the city) on the traditions of the indigenous African societies (the rural). The destruction that is represented is allegorical of innocent slaughter and the effect comes from the stench that emanates from the skins. Langa manages to achieve a complex dualism in a paradoxical attempt to retain tradition while at the same time embracing industrialisation. The effect is fragmentation that comes in the way of progress – a utopian ideal that will remain in a state of intermittent flux with the acknowledgement of the persistence of dystopian reality.

Langa's attempt to reconcile flashing fragments of his home memories with aspects of the space and time that he occupies seems to be a recurring feature in his work. Hence he reconciles and creates tension between binary opposites: past and present, rural and urban, modern and traditional – rendering everything transitory and denying the ability to comprehend anything in fixed definitive terms. Langa states:

Sometimes they are infernal. Only sometimes. What I am mentioning here are The Halcyon Days. I like to imagine that they were nice (that they are nice). Yes, very nice. But that is just it [This is it]. No. Not quite so. They were glorious, [They are glorious]. I live them everyday [a very particular conception of the halcyon days]. I live through some of them everyday, or, rather on some days only. I am just expressing these sentiments, these sentiments only. (Moshekwa 1996:1)

Here Langa poetically expresses a nostalgic romantic feeling to return to the past “Halcyon” days to which he simultaneously refers as “infernal” in the present. In a sense, his neo-conservative utopian craving for the happy days of his rural childhood is evident when he refers to those days as “glorious” in spite of the fact that they were sometimes punctuated with state brutality that made his home a living hell. He attributes his current displacement to those infernal days and the painful memory that sometimes becomes part of his life in exile. Langa expresses this nostalgia in his installation work *The Mountains of my Youth* (figure 43): yarn spools of varying in sizes are presented in attractive child-like colours standing on a red thread networked floor. From one end laid out on the floor

run parallels of white bands. The intersecting network gives one a sense of an imaginary red map. The map suggests dreamlike fantasies of travel, places and the cities of modernity – a utopia. The use of these modern materials is a further ironical suggestion by the artist that although he lives in these Halcyon days, in reality they only remain a fantasy – utopian. On the one hand, the spools suggest interconnectedness and on the other hand, it shows a paradoxical fragmentation. His life remains full of unfulfilled longings, thus the nostalgia.

In figure 44, Langa created a work of two halves which are separated by a narrow strip that forms part of the work content. This suggests a broken link. In the upper half is a two-dimensional aerial representation of a dark surface that is blotched with a network of grid and criss-crossing tapes to suggest a map of a city. A few selected areas of this map contain a network of enmeshed images (probably of Langa) that suggest the blocks of a built-up area. In contrast to this, in the lower half, the garbage plastic material is pasted uniquely to create an aerial view of another map – this time with a three-dimensional effect that can be interpreted as a rural mountain terrain with a few emphatic grids which suggest urban invasion of rural land (“land” in the indigenous tribal context). Some of the blocks/plots are punctuated with photographs – probably families that are linked as a community to the common agricultural or grazing land in the lower left-hand corner. The division can be interpreted as referring to the control of Black migration from rural areas to the cities through establishment of the homelands – a separation that created large divisions of wealth and poverty.

The image also alludes to the dilemma of Langa’s fragmented identity – a self-created world in which the emigrant is caught between the new opportunities that are offered by the city and nostalgia for his rural homeland. While he was in Amsterdam, this theme seemed to have been one of Langa’s pre-occupations. It is repeatedly explored in many of his works, for example *Collapsing Guides* (figure 45). Langa himself has been quoted as saying: “I want to go home. But where is home? My family is in South Africa but my life is not here. My bed is in Amsterdam” (Spector 2005:11). This realisation of his multifaceted identity is not only reflected in his work but also in his use of a wide range

of materials and media. It has led to him being dubbed “a restless scavenger” (Miami Art Exchange: 2003:2). His work bears childlike qualities, yet its sophistication says it is purposefully created (Miami Art Exchange 2003:2). He layers diverse materials, piling up meanings and references that are often cryptic and ambivalent and yet remain resonant.

Figure 46, like many of his drawings, is a childlike colourful map of jumbled jigsaw fragments of names and places that fail to fit. Here the aspect of fragmentation and incoherence in assemblage is more exemplified than in his previous word towers. The tower comprises of bits and pieces of memory that seem to float in a manner that suggests that they cannot be compromised. This is on account of the fluidal nature of their flow-base: most of the pieces seem to be gliding to the left, creating an illusionary aerial view of a current that with a momentary shift of view, shifts the format into a plummeting geological profile of layered meanings which are suggested by the fragments. The overall colourful nature of the fragments gradually evolves into a cluster of map-like islands of information. From the drawing, enigmatic riddles reverberate that are related to the in-between life of urbanised Black people as they try to reconcile their rural tribal values with the fast-flowing metropolitan life. In the case of Langa, it is probably a reference to when he refers to himself as “an inside-outsider”, someone who is caught in-between his self-imposed exile and nostalgia for the rural home of his origins (Ilesanmi 2002:1). Langa’s wonderings allude to those of the poet Ezra Pound. The exile is at the same time an exile of place and time. Pound chose to escape in nostalgia to the past of Europe instead of remaining in twentieth-century America (Bizzini 2004:1). Langa lives both a utopian and dystopian life that speaks of the dilemma of postmodernist contemporary metropolitan life: it is characterised by continual fragmentation and assemblage of utopian and dystopian forms that deny cohesive fixity and unitary progress.

Langa’s awareness of this is evident in his installation movie *Home Movies: Where Do I Begin?* (figure 47) for which he won the FNB Vita Prize 2001. The video consists of three separate image sequences: short pieces that are played simultaneously while being accompanied by the first few nostalgic strains of Shirley Bassey’s song *Where Do I*

*Begin?* The video reiterates the artist's nostalgia for home vis-à-vis his present desires in exile and homes in on the issues of movement, consumption, expatriation and identity. On the whole, the video is a comment on the issues of identity that arises from the urbanising processes which are motivated by alienation, utopian thinking, consumption, migration, urbanisation and expatriation. The fragmentation of the video pieces is a reflection of the fragmentary effect of these processes and the role that they play in exacerbating the crisis. As Langa's disrobed body in the last piece suggests, one ends up incapable of fitting in anywhere and remains in a state of repetitive flux (suggested by the repetitive play of the three pieces) without progress. The borderline of spatial and cultural definition remains blurred as one oscillates between the two states of mind. In the absence of "progress", the utopian ideal ceases because utopia itself plummets into nostalgia as a symptom of hopelessness – dystopia. As Bhabha (1994:2) argues:

Beginnings and endings may be the sustaining myths of the middle years; but in the *fin de siècle*, we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the "beyond": an explanatory, restless movement caught so well in the French rendition of the words *au-dela* – here and there, on all sides, *fort/da* hither and thither, back and forth.

Langa himself infers in one of the riddles of his colour-drenched drawings: you become a "nobody"... "uncertainty your guide" (writing in one of Langa's untitled coloured drawings). One actually ceases to have a sense of direction as one finds oneself caught in the fluctuating tides that rock one between the past and the present. Meanwhile, the future lies in wait and is never certain because new technological developments promise both a bright and a bleak future.

### 3.7 CONCLUSION

As we embrace the achievements of science and technology, we find ourselves constrained to break with our past and our traditions – all in the utopian hope that modernity is the answer to our challenges. The city as a symbol of modernity becomes our vision of hope. The centrality of its glamorous architectural forms, viewed in conjunction with its socio-economic and cross-cultural interactive activities, gives us an illusory belief of paradise. We abandon our serene rural lifestyle and succumb to the alluring forces of this complex cultural phenomenon – only to find ourselves laid bare to the greedy designs of capitalist exploitation. Our indigenous cultural bases become fragmented, reducing us to a loose assemblage of forms with no solid anchorage to any recognisable cultural base. In our desperate attempt to define ourselves, we try to hold on to our past and the origins to which we owe our allegiance. Yet we remain in a state of flux, rocking between the past, the present and the future. It is only then that we realise that our dreams are merely illusory; that we are enmeshed in a complex system of economic and cultural processes that promise both hope and despair. Almost all these processes are underpinned by a profit motive that is driven by unequal exchange relations. Use value has been replaced with exchange value and functional value is overshadowed by aesthetics. The new digital climate and its high-tech culture has renewed our utopian hopes, promising a new social interaction from which we can build virtual communities. But high-tech is even more fragmentary: it is too large, too complex and too uncontrollable to be viewed in utopian terms and, because it is an extension of modernism, it cannot be divorced from the adverse capitalist motives that have always characterised modernity.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Levitas (1990) identifies a wide range of different utopias that include classical utopias, religious utopias and concrete utopias.

<sup>2</sup> Rutherford (1990) recapitulates Derrida's attempt to deconstruct the way in which Western systems of knowledge rely upon some originating moment of truth or immanence from which one whole hierarchy of meaning springs. He argues as follows: "This dependence upon a guarantee of meaning that transcends signification is termed as logocentrism. By invoking its claim to universal truth, such system of knowledge hides cultural diversity and conceals the power structures that preserve the hierarchical relations of difference. Central to this logocentric form of thinking is a system of binary operations and distinctions. Those terms that are pre-eminent and invested with truth, achieve that status by excluding and marginalising what they are not (Rutherford 1990:21).

<sup>3</sup> . He stated this in a personal interview I conducted on the 21<sup>st</sup> of July 2007 at the UNISA Art Gallery in Pretoria.

<sup>4</sup> The interview was conducted on the 21<sup>st</sup> of July 2007 at the Unisa Art Gallery in Pretoria.

<sup>5</sup> Santu Mofokeng, *Condom Billboard* (2004). Black and white photograph (no dimensions or collection information available).

<sup>6</sup> Levine's (1977) explanation here applies to Ishmael, Mofokeng's young brother. The picture was taken when Ishmael was struggling to come to terms with his HIV/Aids condition and thus his visit to the Moutoleng caves. He died shortly after this visit.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **UTOPIA/DYSTOPIA: IMAGING CULTURE(S) IN THE MODERN/POSTMODERN DIGITAL CLIMATE**

#### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

The discussion in the previous chapters of this study has focused on the role of the colonial introduction of the modernist city in changing the perceptions and, consequently, the cultural orientation of the rural indigenous African societies. The modern city (through its sophisticated physical, technological, economic and socio-cultural influence) touches the rural area and ferments perceptions that give the city the utopian image of a liberating paradise. This results in a series of complex cross-cultural interactive processes that are expressed in continuous rural urban migration and urban–rural invasion. The interactive processes translate into a continuous process of decentring and an assemblage of conflicting voices and institutions, resulting in multiculturalism that ends up denying any forms of fixity in the traditional categories (Collins 1989:2). The multiculturalism leaves culture in a state of continuous flux that frustrates all efforts of homogeneity in the interest of unitary social progress. The idea of a group in the context of ethnic, socio-cultural and identity remains volatile because the cultural facets of the group's composition occupy an interstitial space of possible transition that depends on the sway of opinion regarding the ideal process of pursuing the desired ideals. Thus whatever constitution the identity of the group takes remains in a continuous state of flux. This ends up exposing the massive majority of disadvantaged groups to the vicious machinery of capitalist exploitation. It is in the framework of the continuing processes of conflict and reconciliation, decentring and assemblage, acceptance and rejection that the city assumes both a utopian and dystopian character that frustrates all efforts to fight the impact of capitalism. It decentres all forms of fixed cultural categories while at the same time enticing them to subscribe to the unitary membership of globalisation and the homogenising demands of consumer culture.

This chapter focuses on the modernist and postmodernist technological development and its contributions to the renewal of the utopian/dystopian perceptions among contemporary rural societies. In the past two decades the world has been undergoing a period of rapid intensive transformation that has been characterised and driven by the technological revolution (Robins & Webster 1999:1). Machine culture and computer technologies have invaded every level of human space. Rutsky (1999:1) refers to this change as a kind of techno-cultural mutation that has frequently been figured in terms of postmodernity – as part of a broader shift from modern to postmodern culture. He also says that “whatever changes or mutations have occurred in contemporary cultures – whether one calls these cultures post-modern or not – seem to be based less on changes in technology per se than in the very conception of technology, of what technology is” (Rutsky 1999:1). If we share Rutsky's concurrence with Heidegger's perception (cited in Rutsky 1999:2) of these changes as unveiling a broader view of technology that not only restricts the technological to modernist instrumental terms but reveals its link to the realm of art and aesthetics, we can clearly understand why from time in memorial technology has been perceived as both utopian and dystopian. The changes that characterise a more effective and advanced technology can either be celebrated or decried, cast as utopian or dystopian, in terms of its capacity either to serve humanity or threaten it. However, equally utopian and dystopian is their link to the realm of art and aesthetics.

Certain technologies are purely functional and their aesthetics lie in their functionality. Other technologies are aesthetised both functionally and in appearance, while others still are purely aesthetic (for example interior decoration in places such as restaurant kitchens where objects that are normally found in warehouses are used). Whether viewed as “functional” or “aesthetic”, the inability of technology to realise the desired function renders it both utopian and dystopian. From a rural perspective, the twentieth-century modern metropolis – as a phenomenon of technological progress – can be regarded as both utopian and dystopian. This is attributed to its deceptive tendency to aesthetically promise liberating cultural functionality that is never enjoyed by the ordinary rural migrant: architectural designs, dazzling neon lights, shopping centres, restaurants, music in bars and night clubs, dance, fancy motor cars and certain technological cultural tools of

the twentieth century. All these become instruments for metropolitan alienation. Yet, in spite of this alienation, the city's alluring effect remains unchallenged.

The transition from a predominantly industrial society to a new computer electronic one has been associated with the shift from modernism to postmodernism. In this cultural transition, the metropolis assumes a unique spatial configuration that further defuses the boundaries between the rural and the urban. Through high-tech tools of cultural production, the city (to complement modernist urbanisms that are associated with rural–urban and urban–rural invasion) reaches out to the deep recesses of the rural societies to infuse them with new techno-cultural modes of socio-economic exchange. The result is a further multi-faceting and decentring of traditional notions of tribal identities and fixed categories while at the same time giving due recognition to their existence. The speed at which these new technologies mutate has a strong bearing on the rate of cultural transformation that the affected society undergoes. Hannerz (cited in Featherstone 1990:237) refers to this paradoxical transition as evidence of a world culture that is marked by an organisation of diversity rather than by replication of uniformity. It is created through the increasing interconnectedness of varied local cultures and the development of cultures without clear anchorage in any one territory.

On the whole, because of their overbearing and overwhelming tendencies, these new technologies have been received with mixed feelings and emotions. While some have been received with fired enthusiasm for what is perceived as the emancipatory possibilities of “cyber space” and “virtual reality” to build virtual communities, others have been received with scepticism of looming disasters into which their speed of transformation might plunge the world. There are also fears concerning cyber space and a cultural agenda for questions of identity. This agenda manifests itself as an aspect of popular culture – movies, fiction and magazines raise questions about embodied and disembodied identities. The fear of the political-economic agenda of these new technologies is premised on the argument that technologies articulate particular social values and priorities. The question as to the way in which these technologies mediate capitalist social relations has received replies that implicate these technologies with the

capitalist mobilisation of social human resources and markets. Yet, whatever the cultural agendas that these new technologies might have, there is little doubt that the changes in the conception of technology have promoted further cultural fragmentation.

Rutsky (1999) makes an in-depth analysis of the shift in the modernist conception of technology that serves as a useful tool for mapping the contemporary rural vis-à-vis the urban social and visual-cultural implications of this shift. He argues that the essence of technology can no longer simply be defined in terms of the usual modern sense of technology as an instrument, tool or machine; it has been broadened into a more general concept of making or producing, including artistic production. The essence of technology is therefore not a static conceptual category but a dynamic ongoing process or movement that Rutsky refers to as the “aesthetic turn” (1999:8). According to Rutsky, the beginnings of this attempt to merge technology and art can be seen in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, after which modernism assumed the characteristic traits of this aesthetic turn (1999:8). The attempt was characterised not only by the tendency to “technologise aesthetics” but also by the opposite tendency to “aestheticise technology” (Rutsky 1999:9).<sup>1</sup> However, it was defined all too simply in terms of a tendency towards “functional form” or “machine aesthetics”.

The modernist tendency to aestheticise technology is grounded in the romantic notions of the aesthetic – or beauty as an eternal or spiritual realm, unchanging and whole. Although romantic aesthetics generally figured the wholeness of the aesthetic object in terms of organic metaphors as having a kind of indivisible life or spirit of its own, modernist aesthetics attempts to reconcile the aesthetic with the technological – also through the mathematical geometric. To this end Rutsky (1999:9) argues:

Thus, mathematical and abstract geometric forms are figured as having spiritual attributes, as reflecting eternal forms and values. Often as in Bruno Taut’s Glass Pavilion, these aestheticized technological forms were explicitly designed as a kind of spiritual edifice, symbol of unity, for the fragmented modern city. Through this aestheticized technology, not only is the aura of the artwork

maintained, but there is often an attempt to extend it to society in general, as a means of reinvesting modern society with a sense of spirituality and wholeness.

Yet this is an attempt to imbue the technology with a sense of spirituality and wholeness that renders it both utopian and dystopian, for it is in its utopian wholeness that the city reveals its fragmentary effect.

In the same breadth, the modernist attempt to “technologise art” was driven by a noble quest to make art both practical and functional. The idea was to turn away from bourgeois aestheticism to a more technological, and supposedly more democratic, approach – mass production. In terms of this approach, a house was conceived as a machine in which to live and the object of design was of no discernible style but simply a product of industrial order (Rutsky 1999:10). Again, the schemes became counter-productive because human nature defied mechanical ordering, standardisation and rationalisation. As commodity producers, capitalists are dependent on the alienation of labour from its product and needs the capacity of others to buy. Harvey observes that capitalist “producers...have a permanent interest in cultivating ‘excess and intemperance’ in others, feeding ‘imaginary appetites’ to the point where ideas of what constitutes social need are replaced by fantasy, caprice or whim” (1990:102). Productive functionality is conflated with efficacy of use or representational efficacy that directs the development towards the new – the latest to be perceived less in terms of functionality than of style and aesthetics. The idea is to promote consumption through simulation or reproduction, rendering the function of technology more a matter of reproduction or simulation (Rutsky 1999:12). The shift in the conception of technology that is marked by a broader inclusion of artistic production in the essence of technology is one of the aspects that mark the transition from modernism to postmodernism. In the framework of this transition, the city undergoes a complex spatial configuration that demonstrates some combination of modern urban characteristics that is mixed with newer postmodern urban forms which render it more fragmentary eclectic. Yet, we have to remember that to a certain extent the “rural” has been subsumed into the contemporary “urban” to give new meanings to what we have come to understand as “modern” and “postmodern”. In line with this view, Markus (cited

in Bingaman et al 2002:24) speaks about space that flows through both built forms and nature which has the potential of fulfilling the most ancient utopian dream: the harmonisation of culture and nature, *urbs* and *rus* –a city has not only beautiful strong buildings, but these stand in green groves and gardens like rumbling palaces that are grouped among parks.

According to Hall (2001:80), this new urban form (rather than being a single coherent entity) consists of a number of environmentally and economically degraded spaces in-between: “They are said to resemble a pattern of stars floating in space rather than the unitary metropolitan development growing outwardly from a single centre.” He goes further and describes the city as comprising of highly fragmented, lifestyle divisions; a high degree of social polarisations with spatial patterns that are designed for aesthetic rather than social ends; and groups that are distinguished by their consumption patterns. The modern urban structure that was previously characterised by homogenous functional zoning is replaced with a multi-nodal structure; highly spectacular centres; large “seas” of poverty; hi-tech corridors; and post-suburban developments (Hall 2001:80–83). Here the relationship between hi-tech, aesthetics, consumption, multiculturalism and poverty is clearly suggested. Yet this physical constitution of the postmodern city is just an allegorical reflection of its complexity and the broader contextual confluence that the city has taken in reaching out to the rural areas.

Through computer mediated technologies, the city has extended its range of spatial influence to blur the boundaries between rural and urban; the spiritual, mythological and technological; and the “real” and “virtual real” with no sense of geographic space. The fragmentation of the city into a complex web of urban sprawl analogously materialises in the proliferation of computer mediated technologies that extend the city’s virtual confluence to immerse the rural areas. In *Postmetropolis: critical studies of cities and regions*, Soja argues that cities are shifting and changing with relation to space; the spatial aspects of cities are shifting radically away from an experience of a city as a unified space and towards destabilised experiences of “postmetropolises” (2000:1 & 2). In this shift the rural inhabitant becomes immersed in the techno-cultural space of an

invisible city that is configured in terms of computer mediated commercial products through which the rural dweller interacts with the virtual city. This urban invasion is attributed to the proliferation of high technology that leads to a profusion of forms, elements and visual information which result in the increasing complexity and density that is typical of a postmodern metropolis. This complexity has, in turn, become analogous to the complexity of modern computer technology, to microchips and circuit boards.

In the matrix, then, the analogy between the urban grid and the circuitry of the microchip, between the space of the city and the interior space of the sprawl, is “realised”. In the matrix, urban density becomes information density; the city becomes a virtual space that no longer has an “external reality” but exists only in the computer – “inside” of “technology” (Rutsky 1999:116). The city also finds itself immersed in both the physical and spiritual spaces of ethnic virtuality. The inability to draw peripheral delineations to determine limits of phenomenal influences fuses the two spatial phenomena into a unique blend of cultural facets that remain in a continuous state of flux. Thus the infiltration of computer mediated products into the rural area marks not only “real” but also virtual metropolitan invasion. The physical presence of the city not only manifests itself in the form of the visual aestheticisation of a computer, video camera, cell phone, magnetic resonance scanner or DVD player, but is transformed into the encased integrated circuit board that represents the architecture, thoroughfares, highways and lights of the virtual city.

Its utopianess can be attributed to a number of factors. Firstly, the mode of presentation that is used in advertising and marketing (convincing hyper-reality advertising) acts as a powerful force that shapes how high-tech products are used and perceived. Secondly, the aestheticised form purports to give the object the sophisticated style of a high-tech look and the functional aesthetics that endow the object with a spiritual life of its own, echoing the magical powers of the fetish traditional tribal objects. As Mathews (2007:1 & 2)) observes:

The ecstatic flurry of media images and mass communication has created countless new hyperrealities, not of the concrete and enduring, but of the ephemeral, the virtual and ever-changing. The condition we call “postmodernity” may indeed be characterized by these radical transformations in the ways we think of time and space. Since time and space are the vehicles through which we perceive reality, as our perceptions of space and time change, so do our experience of that reality.

Our ability to simultaneously occupy real and virtual space has rendered time relative, thereby conflating our perception of the real and hyper-real. Mathews ascribes this to the principal concept whereby these experiences are commoditised and made consumables – that is “image”. He says: “It is through the insubstantial qualities and mythic content of image that commodities are made appealing to us consumers. As images become decontextualized and liberated from the specificity of substance and place, they become free-floating and thus available for endless recycling” (Mathews 2007:2). In this respect, what is visualised as real is just mediated to appear real in order to affect an aesthetic appeal and desire in potential consumers. This makes us, the consumers, vulnerable to the utopian designs of the producers of electronic media and reveals our fragile appetites for the “latest technology”. In our pursuit of “elevated social status and progress”, we fall prey to the deceit of hyper-reality images in glossy magazines, films and advertisements. The latest virtual reality technology has, through the hyper-reality experience, ingeniously dislodged the notion of “city”/“place” from the specificity of a historical and geographical locale to virtually configured architecture, pop culture, mass culture and social interaction in a manner that smoothes the global functioning of capitalist commercial operations to homogenise the increasing fragmentation of social cultures into a society with a postmodern consumer culture.

For most African rural dwellers, interaction with these ever-changing technologies has become a means of constructing new identities that render these technologies a yardstick for social “progress”. Indeed, in the short term these new electronic technologies have to

a great extent improved our existence. The question is: Are we equipped and ready to cope with their long-term impact? For, as Rutsky (1999:3) argues:

[We] cannot disregard the efficiency with which various information technologies enable an increasing differential, in terms of both economic and knowledge capital, between the technologically rich and the technologically poor. In this sense, high technology continues to maintain a distinction between a “high” and “low” culture, between those who have a “high” level of access to technology and those who do not. Thus, despite the pronouncements of various technological “visionaries” and corporate chiefs detailing how “high tech” will “democratize” society, enabling universal access, participation, and control over one’s life, high technology remains a “tool” for distinguishing social classes.

So far, embracing these new technologies has promoted multiculturalism to the detriment of unitary progress. In the framework of rural vis-à-vis urban postmodernity, “progress” is becoming less configured in terms of how many wives, cattle or land one has. It is being perceived more and more in terms of what one has purchased, what the price is and how technologically advanced it is. This is irrespective of whether the priced value matches the functional value or even whether the terms of purchase are fair or unfair. Our social status is measured in terms of the age group to which we belong; with whom we socialise; the dress fashion that we adopt; and our ability to buy the latest car model, computer, cell phone, DVD player and other computer mediated technologies that are stylized and exorbitantly priced for the moneyed class. Like the technologies to which we subscribe, our passionate desires, cultural orientation and identities remain superficial because it is always in a state of flux that adheres to the unstable nature of the space and time with in which we define ourselves. In our attempt to identify with the present, we remain torn between the past and the future: We subscribe to the traditional practices of our ethnic origins in the hope that we shall be blessed to prosper in the new technocultural world. Yet, paradoxically, we remain adamant in our hollow pledge to uphold and preserve our tribal traditions in the utopian hope of recovering the lost values of our cultural heritage.

High-tech aesthetics therefore become a vehicle for promoting the production and consumption of all consumer goods, including high-tech goods. In effect, the consumer becomes more concerned with the social status that is associated with the price, aesthetic description and possession of a specific technological product than with the intrinsic value that is governed by the functional use of the product. Given the fast rate at which virtual technologies mutate, and as communications and transportation become more and more rapid, there are demands for ever-increasing growth and productivity in the work place. The life span of newer and newer products becomes shorter and shorter as technology offers producers better and better product styles. The increase in transportation and communication networks results in shrinkage of the producer and consumer world both in time and place. Technologies become a means of broadening the market range and promoting enclosures of consumer cultures rather than democratising both rural and urban cultures.

As Powell (2004:1) argues, urban space and virtual space are deeply related, especially when they come together at a certain place and time. Since virtual space knows no confines of geographical space, urban culture is capable of blending with rural culture through virtual space. When this occurs, the distinction between the rural and the urban becomes merely a matter of context – so too the utopian/dystopian mode. Urban–rural invasion and migrations between the rural area and the city, the city and the diaspora, might not necessarily take a physical form. They can be mediated equally as much through virtual technologies. This is one of the ways that postmodernism manifests itself.

## **4.2 ART AND TECHNOLOGY**

From a visual-cultural point of view, the postmodernist change in the conception of technology has also blurred the boundaries between techno-culture, life and visual culture, allowing “art” – the techno-aesthetic sphere which has long been obscured – to be brought forth. This causes techno objects to bear an analogous relationship with African traditional objects which were purely functional in the African context prior to

the infiltration of modernism. By virtue of their physical aesthetic qualities, these objects became highly prized and they were divorced from their traditional functional roles to be included in the realm of Western art. However, they also became instrumental in the conception of early twentieth-century modern art and its avant-garde artistic movements. High tech is by definition a technology that is “at the state of art” which is the “cutting edge” or “leading wave”. In this way, it is reminiscent of the manifestos and slogans of the avant-garde movements which translate themselves not only in the continuous production of the technologically aestheticised “new” but also in the diverse aesthetic experiences that accompany interaction with these technologies. These experiences can become a source of ferment for utopian/dystopian perceptions. The mathematical and formal aspects of science and technology are seen as representing an eternal perfection and harmony. Yet, in its coming to life, technology analogously presents itself as a product of an occult or the supernatural knowledge of a black magic. It becomes possessed by a spirit of reproduction that translates its very function into a matter of representation which, in the end, begins to outstrip the ability to resecure it or even bring it under control. As a result, technology’s effect on perception, space and time come to be seen as so fragmentary and transient that they can no longer be describe in Kantian terms (as autonomous). Technology threatens to fragment the true presence of life; to mathematise and mechanise it; and to make it into an object of domination rather than a subject of control, thereby revealing its dystopian interface (Rutsky 1999:24 & 25).

However, whether or not it is viewed from a utopian/dystopian perspective, the new conception of technology once again brings to the forefront the question of whether photographic images deserve to be included in the realm of art. The topic has been a contested subject of debate with most theoreticians being in favour of a distinction between photography and art. Benjamin (cited in Rutsky 1999:27) uses Baudelaire’s terms in an attempt to draw a distinction between Kantian aesthetics and aesthetic modernism, arguing that from an industrial and technological point of view, modernity was based on “shocks”. As a result of technology’s effect on perception, space and time come to be seen as fragmentary and transient aspects that transform the individual into a kind of receptive machine (Benjamin1969:188). This is in contrast to Kantian’s aesthetics

where the spirit of the beautiful is conjured by drawing an image out of past history and allowed to be brought forth in full presence with an eternal spirit. In the case of the technical reproduction of modernist aesthetics, the unconscious remembrance of a full eternal presence or spirit no longer happens because images do not, as in the experience of the aura, conjure up the spirit of the beautiful (Rutsky 1999:27). Yet in the case of photography, images are capable of being recorded permanently. Do we have to consider them deficient of the permanence of “the eternal and the immutable”?

Benjamin and Baudelaire (cited in Rutsky 1999:37) view photographic images as “dead” on the grounds that they do not carry mystical significance and internal purposefulness. In this way, they attempt to draw a distinction between the scientific-technological and the “natural” magical aesthetic. However, as Rutsky (199:38) argues, the two are part of the same coin, with each re-emerging as dominant depending on the prevailing cultural trends that fuel its re-emergence at the time. For example, during the Renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci’s images of the dissected human body which served as a study of the human body were inter alia aesthetically considered as being directed towards conjuring up the magical spirit of the ideal – the classical beautiful. Analogously, the development of photography which led to the birth of the cinematic machine (a reproduction of fragmentary images can in aesthetic terms be construed as the desire to triumph over death by reproducing the mirror of life – the “perfect illusion” of a completed and fully present representation (Rutsky 1999:30).

The point is that fragmentation and assemblage as part of the process and/or technique have, in various ways, been repeatedly applied by artists in an effort to conjure up or create specific aesthetic experiences.<sup>2</sup> Whether a particular image is from the conscious or unconscious and whether it conjures up an aesthetic experience of the ephemeral or immutable, whole or fragmented, living or dead is all a matter of debate which is likely informed by perception that is informed by the principles of visual aesthetics which govern a particular cultural group. As a facet of the utopian/dystopian phenomena, art works can be technological and spiritual, ephemeral and immutable, autonomous and fragmented, and functional and dysfunctional.

In essence, what “art” is depends on the nature of its conception, time and space; the cultural audience to whom it is presented; and the context in which it is intended to be perceived by the artist. There is a certain degree of consensus that throughout the period that has characterised the modernist art movements, the conception of Western art and technology has been undergoing dynamic shifts that have qualified certain meaning-making processes that yield certain perceptual experiences to be included in the realm of art. Most of these art-making processes are a product of the cross-cultural mixing and blending of previously established processes and styles with new methods of art making that serve to cement the concept that culture is dynamic. The inclusion of new art processes in the realm of art presently detracts from the traditional notion of “art” being perceived as exclusively a Western cultural trait to configure it as part of the globalisation process.<sup>3</sup> Yet, as Hannerz (cited in Featherstone 1990:237) suggests, globalisation should not be seen as signifying cultural homogenisation; it should rather be viewed as a process where there is an increasing interconnectedness of varied local cultures and the development of cultures without clear anchorage in any one territory. In the case of contemporary African artists, this interconnectedness is mainly characterised by artists’ movement and migration (physically and psychically, internally and externally) from the rural areas to the crowded metropolises and to the strange places beyond the global metropolises. Enwezor (1998:2 & 3) explains:

This minimally recognized condition of migrancy, placeness, exile, and displacement serves as a metaphor for what today’s contemporary African artists embody. They travel both at home and abroad, journey physically and psychically, migrate in between the pixelated and information saturated sites of the cyberworld, and inhabit the complex matrices of popular culture that form part of the transterritorial dimension of the global network and exchange systems.

This can certainly be attributed to the recent digital revolution that has become a part of every facet of human life on the globe. With the recent emergence of the digital revolution, visual culture has taken a quantum leap into new aesthetic dimensions that

even at this early stage blurs the distinction between “illusion” and “reality” and “real” and “non-real”. Naturalism and illusionism that throughout the ages have been concepts of artistic production have been reintroduced in various modes of digital artistic production. These artists’ incessant aspiration to reproduce the real world are described by Bazin (as cited in Rutsky 1999:34) as an intent to preserve life through the representation of life. Bazin argues that this desire is exemplified in the religion of ancient Egypt where the desire to preserve life versus death in the underworld took the form of mummification (Bazin 1967:9).<sup>4</sup>

In Bazin’s view, this desire persists in plastic arts, painting, cinema and photography. He substantiates his view by arguing that in these representations one can “discern man’s primitive need to have the last word in the argument with death by means of form that endures”; this “primitive need” is translated into “a larger concept, the creation of an ideal world in the likeness of the real, with its own temporal destiny” (Bazin as cited in Rutsky 1999:34). In other words, it is the concept of utopia that has determined the development of cinema. Bueno (cited in Ascott 1999:217) attributes this primitive need to the human desire to disclose the mystery of existence. He proposes that man’s sensitive perception of reality happens mainly through symbolic discourse and in this discourse image always precedes the idea in the development of human consciousness. These assertions are in line with popular reasons that have been put forward to explain the role of sculptural imagery in the lives of native West-African societies. Most of these objects, particularly the masks, were either used in the masquerade dance rituals or as guardian figures to house the ancestral spirits from which local communities sought guidance and protection against evil, witchcraft, bad luck and natural calamities. The difference between these images and the images that are produced with new technologies is that the former were produced with an “ephemeral” essence while the latter are “transient”.

With the latest technological methodologies and materials, artists can manipulate materials such as photographs and paint to create multi-layered collages and montages that speak of the idea that we are living in a complex, multifaceted and multi-layered

world in which the boundaries between the “real” and the “non-real” have become dissolved. Photography that traditionally has been associated with the representation of the “real” can now be digitally manipulated to produce the “virtual real”. In pursuit of the “real”, art making today is characterised by a cross-reference and cross-pollination of techniques that fuse “illusion” with the “virtual real” to such an extent that the hybridised outcome is being referred to as a “poetic mix”.

According to Fraga (cited in Ascott 1999:211), “poesy” from the Greek word *poiēsis* refers to “the action to make something”. It can refer to beauty or anything that is related with lofty and moving sentiment which is evoked by individuals or things, even though in its common sense “poesy” is the art to write in verse. The meanings of the word “poetic” refer to something that is expressed as visuality and virtuality. Fraga further states that “[t]elematic poetics are characterised as fields which are computer language to make visible the virtual, consequently giving it reality” (Ascott 1999:211). However, the creation of “poetic things” that are essentially virtual realities seems to make the reality more grounded in perception than in creation. Thus actualisation of virtual realities depends more on the perceptual configuration than on the creational mode. Perceptions can be influenced by creations that can be physical, psychological, illusional, delusional or surreal. Fraga (cited in Ascott 1999:212) refers to Elaiide’s argument and states that:

The process of creating “virtual worlds” has shown that virtuality understood in its sense of potential process of becoming and reality are complementary notions that may be expressed as visual experiences either in the form of images or mental perceptions...One of the strangest sensations provoked by the diving in telematic environments is the feeling of almost-trance-*devinir*, which is experienced when wondering in this type of poetic reality. We find parallels between this experience and the ecstatic journey to another state of consciousness produced through a shaman’s trance, sometimes called the descent within one's self.

Thus, in the context of urban–rural versus rural–urban African cultural interactive processes, attempts to comprehend and delineate boundaries that divide phenomena such

as perception, cognition, emotion, feelings and categories (such as virtual, real and visual) have been futile because these thresholds have been blurred (Frag as cited in Ascott 1999:213). The trance experience that a native Khoisan shaman or a Xhosa *sangoma* goes through might not differ much from a breathtaking live experience, a hallucination, a dream or a telematic virtual experience. It is the context and nature of consciousness in which people perceive images that will inform the categorisation of the experience. Yet, from an urban-rural or utopian/dystopian African perspective, all these experiences can be “real”, “non-real” or “virtual real”. Thus in aesthetics “technology” has been “spiritualised” as much as the “spirit” has been “technologised”.

In this postmodernist era, technology is therefore more of a cultural concern with stylish representations or aesthetics than with function. The very fact that there is a change in techno-cultural conception that shifts the focus of the essence of technology from function to aesthetic and that fragments cultures while at the same time deconstructing the traditional notions of space and time implies that there will be a fluctuating change in perceptions which, in turn, will impact on the nature of the aesthetic experience that is obtained from the electronically produced art works. Yet, as we surf the interspatial spaces of fragmented “real” and “virtual reality” images in the context of African rural–urban cultural transition, we cannot fail to draw analogies regarding the perceptual experiences in the aesthetic paradigm that in contemporary Africa inhabit the complex, transient zones of interstitial matrices which arise from the unique blends of rural–urban and traditional–modern polarised cultural domains. The researcher's exhibition *Vision, Perception, Experience* is an attempt to capture frames of visual experiences that inhabit this space, to explore the multitude of ideas that form the key issues which have been discussed in the preceding chapters and the forgoing discussion of this chapter of this study.

### **4.3 VISION, PERCEPTION, EXPERIENCE**

The researcher's work is a visual exploration of the hybridities and constantly shifting processes that characterise the cross-cultural interactive processes between the

contemporary techno-cultural metropolis and the African rural scenario. The two-way interactive processes that are rural–urban migration and urban–rural invasion have resulted in a dissolution of the boundaries that delineate the two previously polarised phenomena, allowing for fragmentation and assemblage to create new unstable forms that seem to occupy the interstitial spaces of transition between the two domains. To a greater degree, these processes derive from the processes that have characterised changes in the conception of technology and the notion of aesthetics. Thus the researcher's work reflects not only how change in the conception of technology translates into socio-cultural fragmentation but also about how this change affects the notion of aesthetics. It explores the social and visual-cultural implications of this change by inviting the viewer's sensibility to a responsive dialogue over the number of related issues that are raised by the art works. These are mainly issues that deal inter alia with the paradoxical nature of the parameters which delineate the utopian and the dystopian, the metropolitan and the rural, fragmentation and assemblage, traditional culture versus postmodern culture, aesthetics and consumer culture, the conscious and the subconscious, the magical/spiritual and technological, chaos and complexity, the ephemeral and the immutable, and the “virtual real” and the “real”. These issues are facets of the whole series of processes that reiterate the question *Who are we and where are we going?*

Although certain ideas seem visually overexposed in some of the works, the bottom line is that no work deals with a single idea at the expense of other ideas because in life things depend on the environment in which they are formed and the context in which they acquire meaning. Each of the works explores a multitude of issues which are intended to signify meanings that engage the viewer into experiences that carry him/her beyond what is represented. Indeed, the nature and intensity of the experiences will vary from individual to individual. This is part of the artist's intention: to affirm the multiculturalness of our contemporary socio-cultural existence, its utopian/dystopian nature and the accompanying adverse socio-economic implications in spite of our narcissistic perceptions of ourselves in these conditions. Yet, if we come to share similar experiences, it should remind us of the inherent strains of homogeneity that we still share despite our fragmented state. The works themselves are autonomous because each is

framed to assume its own space, yet they remain fragmented wholes that differ diversely in their iconographic content but are nevertheless conceptually related in their affinity to the wholeness of the exhibition concept.

#### **4.4 WORKING PROCESS AND CONCEPT**

Both the researcher's concept and working process are partially enshrined in the explanation that Rutsky (1999) puts forward on the impact of change in the conception of technology and the notion of aesthetics. He argues:

[I]t is not only the conception of technology that has changed, but also the notion of aesthetics. The aesthetics can no longer be figured in the traditional terms of aura and wholeness, nor in the modernist terms of instrumentality or functionality. Like technology, it too comes to be seen as unsettling, generative process, which continually breaks elements free of their previous context and recombines them in different ways. In this way, the technological and the aesthetic begin to “turn” into one another. (Rutsky 1999:8)

Three stages in the making process of the researcher's work characterise this “turn”. They are: (1) the construction and reconstruction of architectural “models” and photographing these “models” from various angles, (2) the random photographing of various rural and urban scenes that manifest the modern-technological, traditional-cultural, commercial and movement, and (3) the use of computer imaging to select, collage, paint, blend and simulate certain selections into different realities in order to arrive at a finished art work.

For the first stage, the researcher chose his rural setting of Cala as a place for source material and visual content. He decided to make an eclectic collection of an assortment of both bought and thrown-away industrial products. These included chipboard, plywood, Aerolak spray paints, decorative ribbons, gift wrapping paper, compact discs, cardboard containers, plastic bottles, cigarette packets, the metallic silver linings of cigarette packets, lab specimen test trays, toys, pot scrapper sponges and ventilator covers. Each of

the items is taken out of its narrow literal context to represent broader cultural facets of the metropolitan phenomenon (for example ventilators as building material covers can represent construction and design and the elimination of pollution, while cigarette packets speak of pollution and accompanying industrial health hazards; compact discs fall in the realm of pop and techno culture).

The researcher used layered cut-out plywood pieces, chipboard and cardboard containers as basic structural forms and put together all the material to construct model architectural forms that echo Isek Kingelez's utopian model "cities". These represent contemporary architecture in the context of Mathews' view that its current "popularity would appear in large part to be an effect of commodity fetishization, since it is largely preoccupied with style, fashion and image rather than, for example, substantial and social issues" (Mathews 2007:2). The diverse materials that are used in construction as industrial products reflect the utopian/dystopian role in a cycle process of cultural fragmentation and assemblage (that is, cultural production as characterised by the breakdown of the rural by the urban, the subsequent rural–urban invasion that in turn leads to urban–rural invasion, et cetera). For example, plywood and chipboard are products of deforestation and the transformation of trees into wood. Chipboard itself is a product of wood cutting and layering chips of sawdust. This process signifies the centrality of fragmentation and assemblage in the aesthetic "turn" in cultural production. It is a medium that speaks of both architectural invasion and commercial invasion of the rural area through manufactured consumables such as furniture.

In the same manner the process of cutting gift wrapping paper alludes to urban cultural fragmentation, while using ready-made products for spraying, wrapping, decorating and stacking all speak of cultural construction and assemblage. They are all an integral part of contemporary processes of cultural production that are characterised by layering. Layering becomes a means of aestheticisation that gives the final product an aesthetic finish which renders it utopian. The final product (the model city) itself is fragile and capable of being dismantled and reconstituted into new models of architectural forms, thus revealing the fragility and temporality of utopian forms. The fact that the models are

non-real emphasises the utopian/dystopian nature of the phenomenon that they represent – the city.

As already indicated, the compact discs can be interpreted as signifying both the role of Pop culture and electronic techno-culture in its construction of culture. The disc is layered information that speaks of the minimalist tendency of high-tech aesthetics which is inextricably linked to the complexity that is also associated with high tech. In its use as part of assemblage, the researcher is reiterating its mutative role in the creation of a cultural mix of different forms of popular culture and information technology that mediate the creation of virtual reality. It also reflects on other technological and electronic products such as the coffee maker, DVDs, hi-fi's and heaters that constitute the researcher's visual content in the second stage of visual research and exploration. These products have found common integration in the socio-cultural set-up of rural communities. As mentioned earlier, it has become fashionable for these communities to have these products because of their aestheticised form and function. These products not only speak of the city – they speak of its utopianess/dystopianess through the utopianess of techno-culture. They also speak of how this utopianess finds expression in consumer culture.

The second stage involved photographing from various angles chosen points of different parts of the models that had come from the dismantling and assemblage process. This was complemented with a field research survey that involved photographing both rural and metropolitan scenes to try and bring into play the idea of the “real” versus the “non-real”, the urban versus the rural, the technological versus the spiritual, and the modern/postmodern versus the traditional. This stage also included the scanning of maps, the outline of drawings and the photographic documentation of the models, rural and metropolitan scenes, traditional cultural objects, insects, birds, animals and all other objects that were considered metaphors in the expression of the rural, the tribal, the spiritual or even the magical. All imagery was transferred into the computer so that it could be used as imagery sources in the third stage of production.

The third stage was the final creating stage. It was mainly characterised by the use of computer imaging to select, copy, collage, paint, blend and simulate certain selections into different realities in order to arrive at the finished art work. By using studio facilities, this was later developed and enlarged into a selected size. The translation of photographic imagery to create images of strange spaces and modes of virtual experiences in imagery follows the construction, configuration and visual capturing, selecting and juxtapositioning of materials, processes, technologies and states that are associated with qualities of information such as fluidity, lightness, complexity, ambiguity and transparency. The idea was to create and generate powerful and virtually different visualisations and conceptualisations of virtuality that avoid compositional relationship to the “real” while at the same time alluding to it. Although the work has a direct association with montage, its methodology, media operations and thematic focus set it apart. The critical blends of different processes created a new hybrid paradigm horizon not only for art creation but cultural analysis. By means of computer imaging, the selected areas of these images were copied and layered onto another image and then they were reconfigured by using various photographic editing tools, painting tools and blending modes to make a final work.

The choice of photography as a secondary medium was premised on the idea that layering over photographic images reinforces the notion of cultural layering and that, in the end, multi-layering speaks of the discourses that are addressing the contemporary postmodern issues of multiculturalism, eclecticism and complexity. Photography also provides a viable method of interrogating relationships between representations, reality and virtual reality, while text and captions serve to consolidate its ideological power. In works like *Whoosh* (figure 48), the researcher had to use maps to bring in the idea of the blurring of geographical delineations between rural and urban and questioning the reality of these delineations. The researcher also tried to explore the centripetal pull and hold that the city has had both in time and space over the surrounding rural area. As Brown (cited in Ascott 1999:47 & 48) observes, the notion that cultural identity is tied to the geographical location, a nation or a village is changing. It is likely that the geographical frontiers that circumscribe cultural identities will give way to electronic boundaries. In

the future, culture and identities will exist in digital territory (across space and time) and therefore specific strategies are needed to help maintain social cohesion amongst a group of dispersed individuals to define the electronic frontiers of their collective memory.

In *Strange Visions* (figure 49) the researcher created an image that exemplifies a telematic, trance or virtual experience. Indeed, in the actual experience the images will likely take on both a real and a cinematic character, thereby allowing surrealist mode and motion to play a role in transformation. The images are frozen but blended to deny a clear identity, thereby inviting the viewer to repeatedly surf through the work in an attempt to read the meaning behind the form and spatial relationships. In this way, the viewer's eye movement compensates for the motion that characterises the cinematic experience while blending alludes to transformation.

*Through the Virtual Eye* (figure 50) attempts to explore the recent impact of technoculture on the rural vis-à-vis contemporary metropolitan interaction. Everything comes to be viewed from a techno-cultural point of view, allowing techno culture to direct cultural transformation processes that promote further fragmentation. The impact of this fragmentation is not immediate because the migrants still have their hopes in *Paradise City* (figure 51). However, all this comes to an end when the reality dawns on them that *Paradise City* is not real; they become enmeshed in its dystopian realities with nowhere to turn to. Their entrapment is expressed in the representation of this realisation in *No Way Out* (figure 52).

*Bone Dry* (figure 53) is a visual scenario that reflect on how the city, through its capitalist industrial system, drains the rural area dry and ends up cutting off the life source that sustains its own existence. The work makes a subtle commentary on the contemporary global environmental crisis and the global economic issues that are characterised by signs of global recession.

As already stated, the inclusion of imagery of electronic technologies is intended to refer to the city. The circuit boards are an analogy to the city that exists in the computer and is

immersed in the spiritual and magical of African ancestral traditions; however, the city has also been reduced to information density and it becomes virtual space in which the rural becomes immersed, rendering it difficult to draw a dichotomy between the virtual “spiritual” and the virtual “technological”. The aesthetic experiences between the two cannot be discerned and because of the transient nature of these experiences, they can only be vaguely recorded in the subconscious, in memory. However, Palmer (as cited in Ascott 1999:24) observes, memory borrows from perception in order to become actualised. This suggests that when memory presents imagery as a continuous process of the decentring and assemblage of the real, then there is evidence of mixed perceptions (rural/urban, real/virtual real and utopian/dystopian) irrespective of the spatial contextualisation. The experience can present itself as *real* but *virtual* in nature (Palmer as cited in Ascott 1999:24). The contextual form, time and space in which this experience is configured are relative; it can take the form of a trance, a dream, a hallucination, a digital telematic vision or even a spell.

The researcher's work is a personal expressive attempt to create a series of stills that capture transient visual experiences of the virtuality that is characterised by contemporary rural–metropolitan or metropolitan–rural multicultural interactive processes which have been influenced by recent technological developments. The fact that the work will likely be received with mixed feelings and perceptions underlines the cultural paradox that characterises our experiences and perceptions of the contemporary world.

Furthermore, the inclusion of imagery of electronic technologies is intended to reiterate the new conception of technology where the function of the digital camera and the computer is used to aestheticise technology through its self-representation while, at the same time, speaking of technologising aesthetics through use of technological mediums to create art. The use of photography as foundational or base material with sculpture, photomontage and computer processing is all intended to iterate the shifts and amendments that have come to characterise the world as we know and experience it: the idea that the world is multi-faceted, multi-layered and complex – if not also chaotic. In a way, the addition of technology to the traditional repertoire of mediums has changed our

view and perception of the world. Keith Dietrich, one of South Africa's contemporary artists who has adopted the use of the medium, says that technology is a kind of metaphor for understanding and seeing the world: "Our view is always mediated – we understand through glass, through lenses, and apertures" (cited in Gurney 2006:1). Moshekwa Langa<sup>5</sup> uses video technology to raise the question of "home" in the context of space and time. In *Home Movies: Where Do I Begin?* (figure 47), he expresses tension between his present self-imposed exile and rural home in South Africa on the one hand and questions his ability to capture the atmosphere which he associates with the meaning of "home", a utopia that in the past, on the other hand.

In his work, the researcher uses technology to question the cultural delineations between the rural and urban and the traditional and postmodern in the African context of space and time. The idea is to comment on how blurred these delineations are and how this fragility paradoxically impacts on human perceptions and cultural creation which, in some respects, can be detrimental to those who occupy the fringes of socio-economic deprivation and those who fall prey to the utopian designs of capitalist techno-cultural aestheticisation (particularly the traditional folk culture). These are represented through the representation of traditional art forms, objects, dwellings, animals and birds. The animals and birds also carry connotations of African traditional rituals and beliefs. Animals such as cattle, goats and sheep have a strong cultural significance and they are slaughtered as part of cultural rites, rituals and feasts. Protection of these animals is done through branding; however, because of money economy, the cultural value of these animals is disappearing as they deplete in importance and numbers. Branding has taken on a form of commercialisation that is metaphorically manifested in the advertisement billboards. Through image, culture is commoditised and made consumable.

Such is the utopian nature of the contemporary metropolis that it derives its appeal from the physical and socio-cultural "images" that proliferate everywhere and are projected as "reality". Outside the city's physical borders, its dystopian realities remain masked in the over-aestheticisation of its different cultural paradigms. As we reach the threshold of its geographical and/or techno-cultural virtual influence, we become sensitised to its

dystopian nature. Hall (2001:97) refers to its inner part as a sea of despair that is characterised by informal economy and social control which is based on violence and threat. Tomlinson et al (2003:101–284), with reference to Johannesburg, comments on the high levels of crime, prostitution, devastating poverty, AIDS and other social evils that those who live on the margins of economic deprivation face. To these evils, one has to add global warming and its effect on food production, natural calamities, disasters, sky-rocketing energy prices, insufficient electrical energy supplies and inflation. One can also add the over-simulated dystopian fiction. All these have significantly shifted the balance in favour of bleakness.

Yet, despite these hardships, the cities continue to attract new arrivals who consider themselves better off in the city than remaining in rural areas where their chances of economic success are slim. Not only do cities offer better employment prospects, they also offer cultural amenities, stimuli and some very basic services that are lacking in most rural regions (Dogan & Karsarda 1988:7). The question of *where are we going* has never been more urgent. We are on a path where we can only define ourselves in terms of “the present”, which (as Bhabha 1994:2 observes) is a signification of the “post” – a moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. We can only use its dystopian mode to forge our utopian dreams.

#### **4.5 CONCLUSION**

In chapter 1 of this study the perceptual implications of the colonial introduction of the modern city in rural Africa was discussed. This introduction resulted in the conception of modernist utopian/dystopian perceptions that kick-started cultural changes which had both a positive and a negative impact on the lives of ordinary Africans. The utopian faith that was characteristic of the new spatial phenomenon led many Africans to abandon their rural tribal lifestyles in search of better prospects in the cities. What began as urban cultural invasion of the rural area turned into a rural cultural invasion of the urban space. The two-way cross-cultural interactive processes resulted in multiculturalism that was

intrinsically driven by unequal capitalist exchange relations. Artists adopted new tools of cultural practice which, in turn, escalated into the creation of art forms. This only serves to affirm Ziegler's (1942:19) observation that culture influences the individual but is also dependent on the individual; it is modified by those individuals who comprise the group and the ones who surround the group. In essence, we create culture and culture creates us. When artists adopt new tools of artistic practice, the tools transform their cultural artistic production which in turn translates into the creation of new cultural art works that will have a new impact on society. It is, however, important to understand that utopian/dystopian thinking is central to the essence of cultural production. In this respect, perception of the city as a utopia is instrumental in fuelling cultural production. Thus culture is not static but dynamic.

In chapter 2 the manifestations of utopian/dystopian thinking as characterised by the migrations and movements of artists from the rural to the growing metropolitan centres was analysed. These movements, whether psychical or physical, all operated in the conceptual framework of the transition and transformation of indigenous African tradition to modes of modern Westernised Africanness. Movement becomes not only a signification of utopian/dystopian thinking but an expression of cultural change. The metropolis not only becomes a centralising force but also a conflicting and fragmenting force that reduces multitudes of invading fixed categories to complex facets that are in a continuing state of flux. The utopian/dystopian nature of the metropolis becomes articulated in the movement of populations from rural to urban, agrarian to industrialised, national to post-national and transnational with preconceptions of the metropolis as the ideal destination (Enwezor 1982:2). Within these movements, artists remain nomads who are in a state of physical and/or psychical transition and whose sensibilities (as Cassel 2000:1 observes) "have been shaped by personal journeys that move beyond national understanding of themselves". However, this nomadic trait of artists is an affirmation of Nesbit's observation that "[u]topia itself has become a no-place, empty rhetoric at best, an exotic vacation, the desert island of the empty cliché" (Nesbit 2003:327). It becomes a vehicle for the decentring and assemblage of cultural forms that renders it difficult to

adopt the common ground which is necessary to fight capitalist exploitation. The city therefore reveals its true dystopian character.

Chapter 3 looked at how the utopian and dystopian character of the city unveils itself in its structural forms that lure rural dwellers from their traditional homes with the utopian hope of better prospects in the city. The idea of progress as a unitary aspiration is watered down to subjectivity as traditional homogeneity gives way to multiculturalism. The utopian aspect of the city ceases to be a source of hope for the migrants as they find themselves compelled to succumb to capitalist terms of unfair exchange relations. The very aspects that render the city a source of hope (the dazzling neon lights, high rising skyscrapers, night clubs and billboards) become signifiers of the hold which the capitalist system has on the city, making it a source of misery that is expressed in the growing souvenirs of poverty which are characterised by health hazards, unemployment and other kinds of accompanying social evils. In the city the terms “society” and “community” lose their meaning to refer to a homogeneity that characterises hierarchical classes of consumer groups that render all of us members of one culture: the consumer culture. The faith that is placed in political institutions wanes as service delivery that trickles down hardly impacts on the lives of those who are at the bottom rung of poverty. Visual culture, at one time believed to be capable of democratising society, has lost its ability to influence transformation. It has been subsumed into the new realm of cultural phenomena and has become just a matter of techno-cultural style. As Rutsky (1999:12) observes:

In “aestheticizing” the functional and the technological, modernism separates technological form from function; it allows stylistic or aesthetic elements to be “unsecured” from their previous context and to be recombined and reassembled into new configurations according to the dictates of “style” of “aesthetics”. Yet the “aesthetics,” as it comes to be seen in terms of the technological, moves away from the romantic notions of wholeness and spiritual value; in other words it loses an aura. As such the aesthetic will become indistinguishable from culture more generally. The aesthetic, in short, becomes a matter of style, a technological or techno-cultural style.

This “unsecuring” of the aesthetic elements from their previous functional context in the traditional African style is discernible from the new modifications of traditional fashions that are adopted as part of the postmodern trend. It has also become fashionable to use models of traditional cultural craft objects for decoration. Equally so, in terms of new electronic and technological objects such as cell phones, the idea of the latest as characterised by style takes precedence over function. It is obvious that capitalism has taken advantage of this “turn” to substitute “use” value for “exchange” value. “Aesthetics” itself becomes part of the multicultural process, remaining unstable and in a state of flux. It becomes subjectively incapable of promoting unitary progress because it is part of the unstable cultural mix that is manipulated to work in the interest of the technologically equipped few – those who subscribe to the “ideals” of capitalism.

We might know where we are coming from, but the urgent question is: Who are we and where are we going? We have been sucked onto a roller-coaster ride of recent postmodern techno-cultural developments that promise a better world while at the same time threatening it. These developments are generating complex socio-economic and cultural changes that render it difficult for us to forge ahead. Our traditional cultural bases have been fragmented, reducing us even more to a loose assemblage of indefinable forms that are in a continuous state of flux. From a rural-metropolitan point of view, the geographical spatial delineations have been blurred as the rural spaces become immersed in urban techno-cultural spaces and urban space is invaded by rural spiritual-virtual spaces. The techno-virtual space and the spiritual-virtual spaces become contextual and temporal as technology keeps altering its configuration. In the maze that characterises all these dynamic shifts one clear change emerges – that of the essence of technology. The essence of technology becomes more a matter of reproducibility and aesthetics, with its role geared towards the promotion of utopian thinking that will boost commodity consumption. Consumption becomes the central form of cultural homogeneity that is shared among fragmented societies. Yet it has to be pointed out that it is *consumption* of capitalist goods that has assumed a central systematic role in the reproduction of capitalist society. The question that should be answered at this juncture is whether the

new cultural dynamics and technological progress will guarantee progress and a better life. There is a need to slow down, to step back to evaluate this critical situation if we are to make any headway in social progress.

As a rural-based artist, the researcher might not have the appropriate answers for the issues that have been raised. However, based on what he understands of the contemporary rural vis-à-vis metropolitan, he shares the views of South African philosopher Johan Rossouw, which appeared in an article in the *Beeld* newspaper (2008:7). Rossouw shared his views of the characteristics of the ideal city (to which the researcher adds his own perceptions): It is a crime-free city where everybody can move and be safe at any time of the day. It is a city with an ethos: a way of living that is characterised by respect for one another, hospitality, courtesy and patience that is experienced on the streets, in shops and all places of public interaction; a city where there is no antagonism, shouting, spite, deceit or xenophobia; a city which remembers that it was built by immigrants, a small group that grew into a bigger group bringing their skills, initiatives, labour and culture.<sup>6</sup> It is a city where the word “poverty” means living in an environment with reasonably good minimum living standards; a city where diseases such as AIDS, cancer and diabetes are curable; a city with clean parks and natural flowing rivers with clean water; a city where there is more bicycles, trams and pedestrians than heavy polluting traffic; a city free of pollution, litter and industrial, sewer or garbage waste; a city where women can dream and families can have picnics with domestic animals; a clean city where people can interact happily; a city free of any form of manipulation or exploitation; a city where all people live in peace, harmony and prosperity.

This “model” is also only a utopian dream; it is very idealistic and almost unattainable. But humans are dreamers and dreaming has always given them an impetus to strive to attain an idealistic, utopian destination. This is also the researcher's dream; a dream that he tries to express in his art. He is an idealist with romantic inclinations, a utopian artist who exploits his art to create his own utopian fantasies. The question whether these fantasies are feasible is indeed debatable, but in the spirit of optimism that was expressed

in the campaign slogan of the new president of the United States of America, Barack Obama: “Yes we can!” With the common good will of everybody, this city will cease to be a dream. It will become a reality.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Here Rutsky gives an example of aestheticisation of technology by comparing Heidegger’s associations of aesthetic turn with the Nazi vision of an aestheticised technological state. However, he points out that “within modernism, the desire to aestheticize technology is not limited to those who express explicitly reactionary or fascist political statements that it must be considered as much a part of the definition of modernism as the much more commonly noted tendency to technologize aesthetics” (1999:9).

<sup>2</sup> Vincent van Gogh applied it technically by using broken heavy brush strokes of vibrant tones of colour which can be construed as paralleling the present pixels. Pablo Picasso and Braque used it in their cubist images. It also applied by *futurist, de stijl* and *Dada* artists, to mention a few.

<sup>3</sup> Tenbrucke (cited in Featherstone 1990:204) states that “[t]he expansion of European cultures has resulted in the ubiquitous co-presence and interpenetration of all cultures. Development has enhanced global migration and dislocations of people and has moreover forced individual cultures into world wide efforts of presenting and exporting their music, literature and religion, their ideas, world views and lifestyles abroad. Yet what we presently perceive as world wide manifest increase in multicultural conjunctures will historically prove a contest over the preservation, survival, domination, dissolution and extinction of cultures.”

<sup>4</sup> He argues that the mummies and statuary of ancient tombs were intended for the magical purpose of “the preservation of life by representation of life”, in other words representation became a means to an “eternal” life (Bazin 1967:9).

<sup>5</sup> An extensive discussion of Moshekwa Langa’s work was done in chapter 3.

<sup>6</sup> This is with reference to many African cities. For example: From the beginning, Johannesburg was viewed as a city of "uitlanders" or foreigners. This term was first applied by the Afrikaners towards the English, but was soon used as a label for Black people also (Tomlinson et al 2003:2).

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## ADDENDUM: ILLUSTRATIONS

### UNKNOWN ARTISTS



Figure 1. *Umqokozo* (women's necklace)2005



Figure 2. *Isiyambane* (head dress for amagqira) 2006



Figure 3. *Umqokozo* (neck and head dress) 2006



Figure 4. *Ipasi* (head band) 2006



Figure 5. *Ipasi* (head band) 2005



Figure 6. *Ithumbo* (necklace originally worn by men now unisex) 2006



Figure 7. Tommy Motswai *Faces at Christmas*, 1988



Figure 8. Tommy Motswai *Travelling for pleasure*, 2000

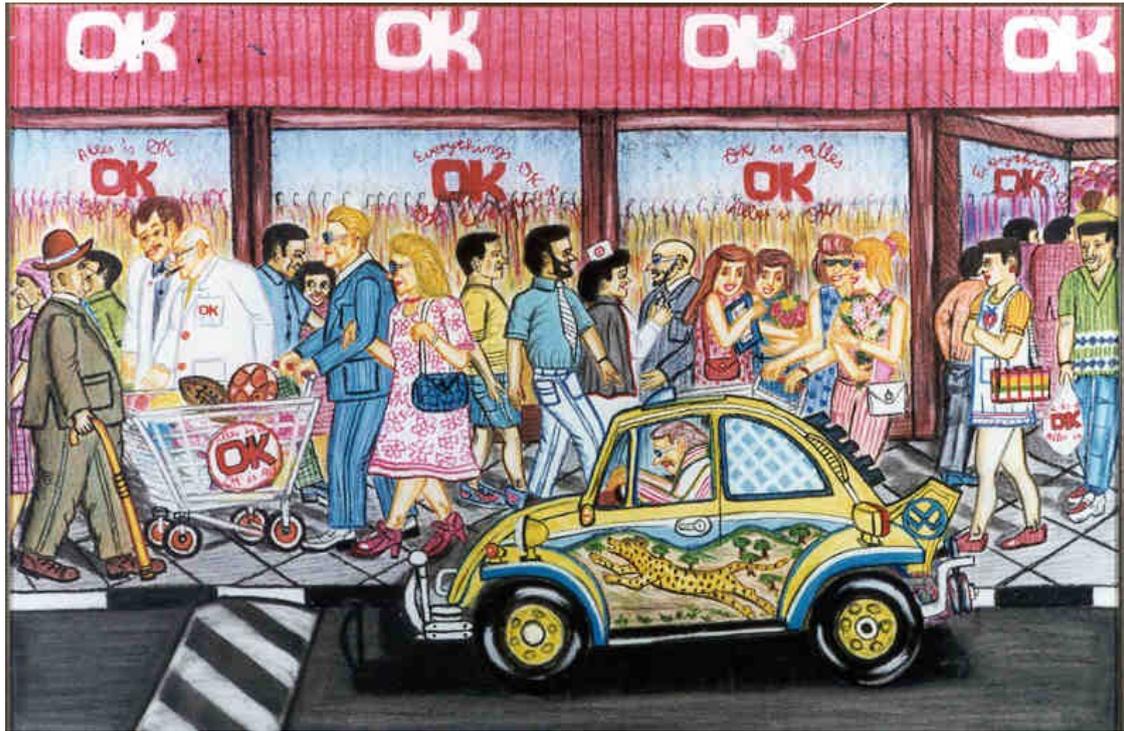


Fig. 9 Tommy Motswai *The O.K. is everything* 1988



Fig. 10 Tommy Motswai *Graduation at Wits* 1988



Figure 11. Tommy Motswai *South African High Business 2005*



Figure 12. Tomy Motswai *Cadillac, 2005*



Figure 13. Tommy Motswai *Young mothers and Hawkers in Mabopane*, 2001



Figure 14. Tommy Motswai *Matric*, 2002



Fig. 15 Tommy Motswai *Flying SAA to Canada* 1995

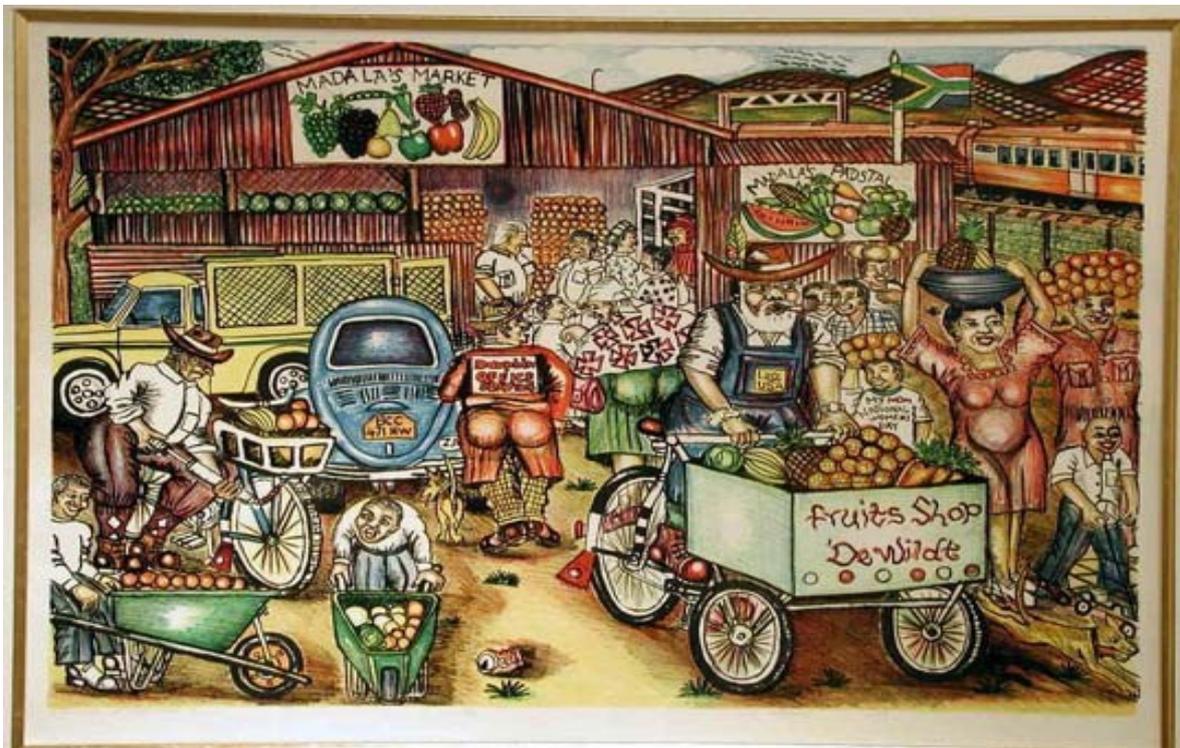


Fig. 16 Tommy Motswai *Township at De Wildt* 1996

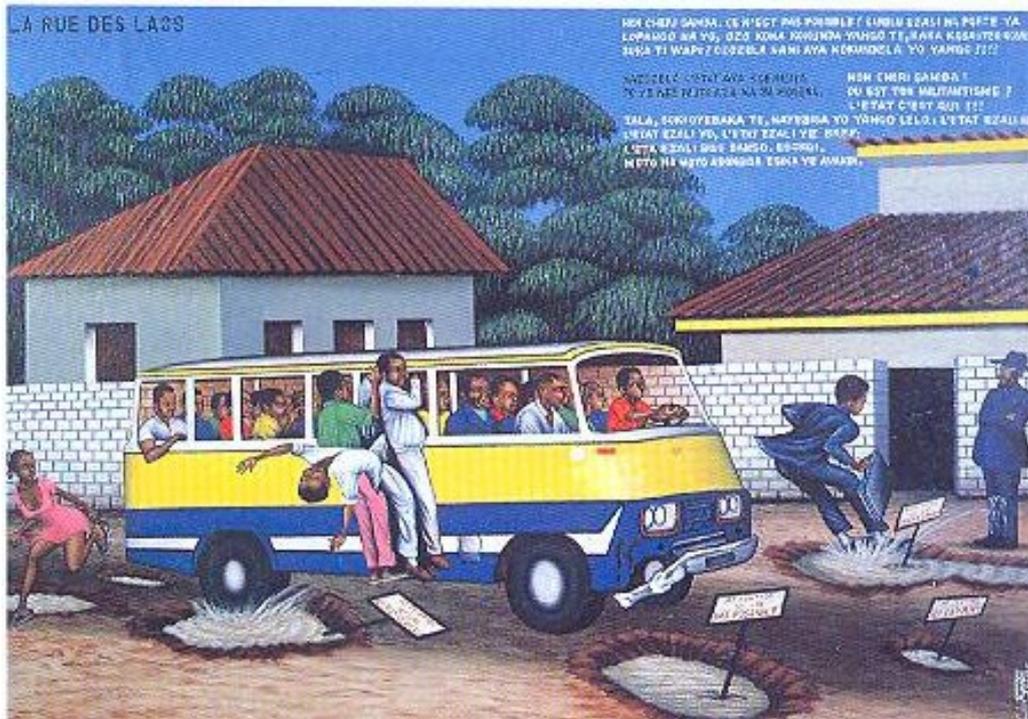


Fig. 17 Cherry Samba *La Rue des lacs* (the Street of lakes) 1990

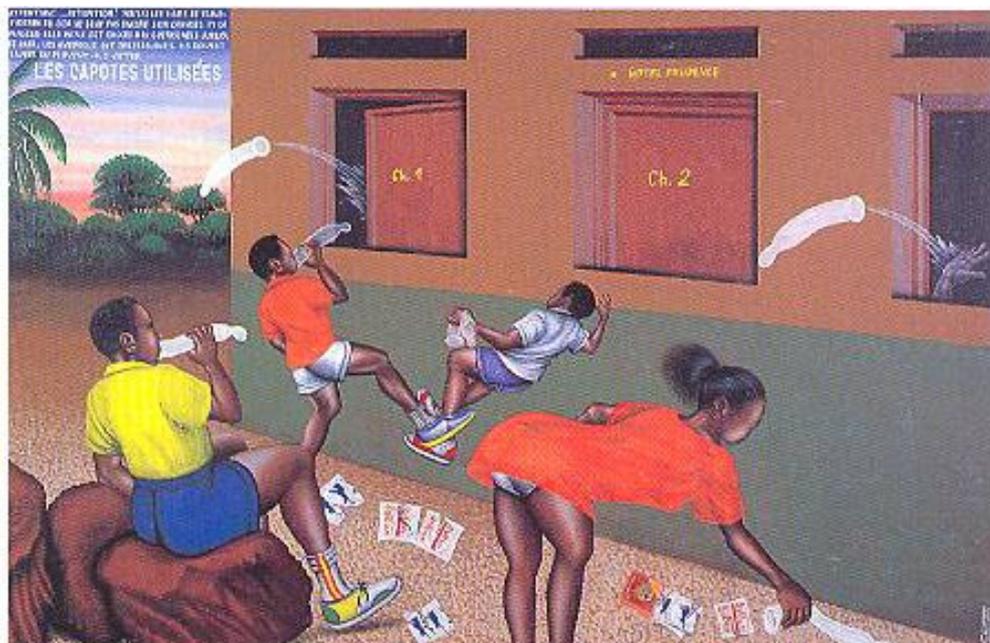


Fig. 18 Cherry Samba *Les Capotes utilisees* (Used condoms) 1990



Figure 19 Bodys Isek Kingelez *New Manhattan City*, 2001-2002



Figure 20. Bodys Isek Kingelez *Kimbembel Ihunga (Kimbeville)*, 1994



Fig. 21 Bodys Isek Kingelez *Place de la Ville* 1994



Fig. 22 Bodys Isek Kingelez *La Ville de Site en 3009*, 2000



Figure 23. Daniel Mosako ,*Gauteng-That place* 2006

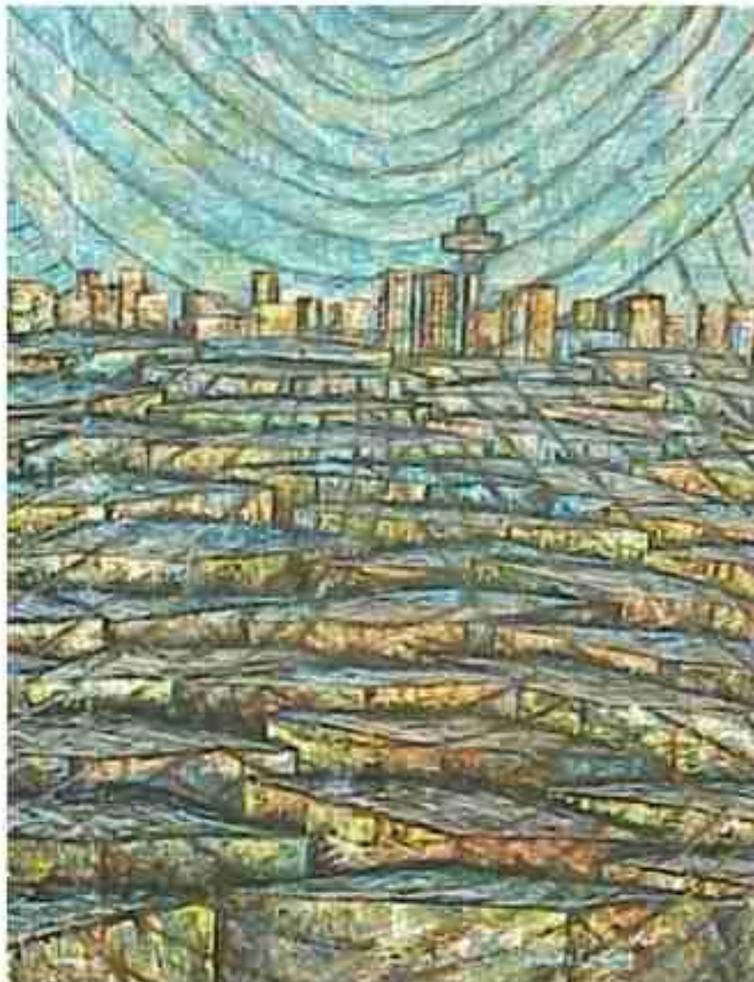


Figure 24. Daniel Mosako, *Jhb-Mshengo* 2006



Figure 25. Daniel Mosako (Untitled) (No date Available)



Figure 26. Daniel Mosako (Untitled) (2006)



Figure 27. Daniel Mosako (Untitled) (No date Available)

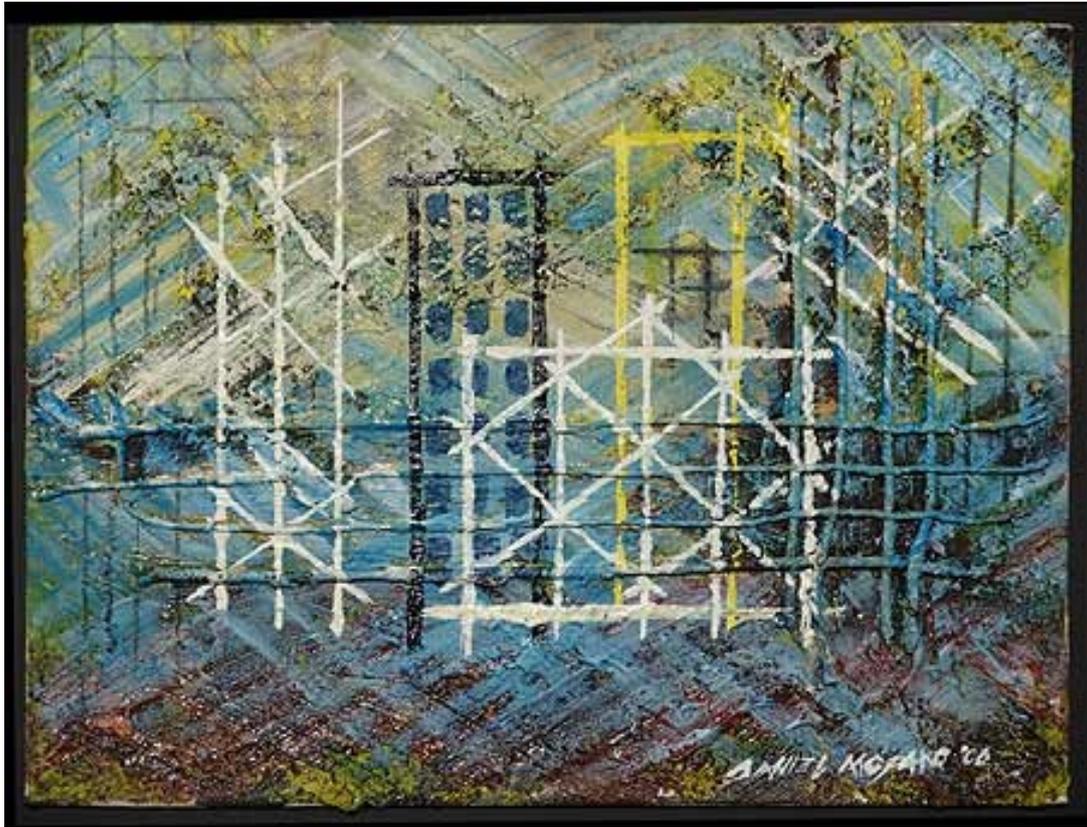


Figure 28. Daniel Mosako (Untitled) (No date available)



Figure 29. Daniel Mosako (Untitled) (No date available)

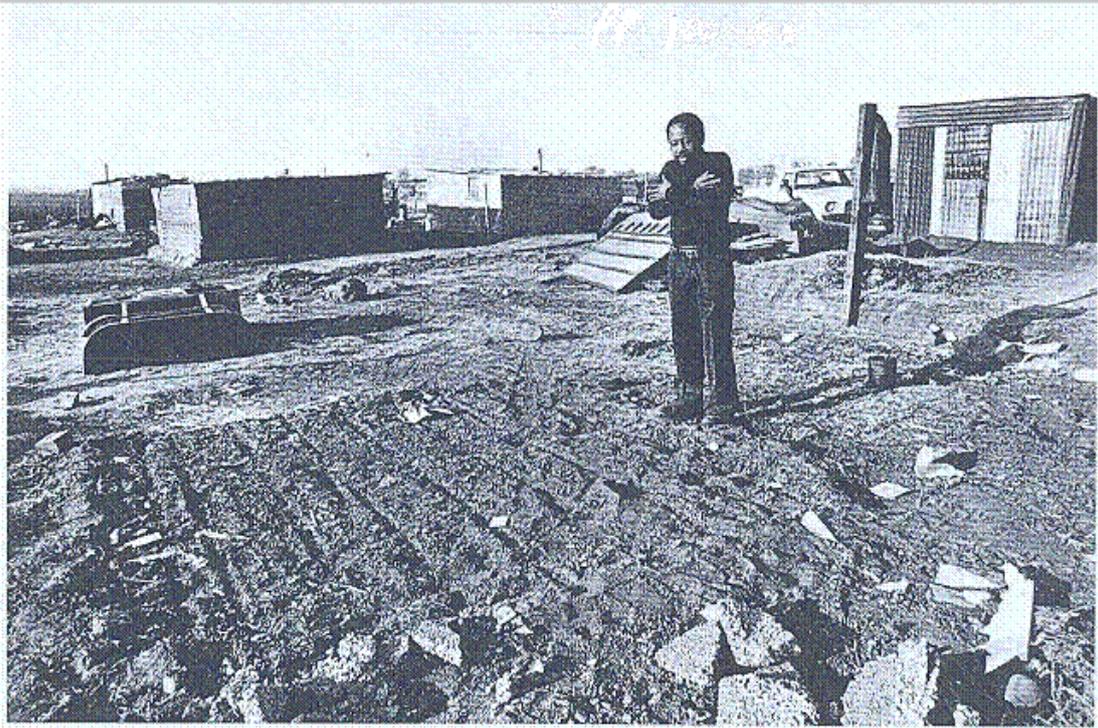


Figure 30. Santu Mofokeng, *Going Home*, (no date available)



Figure 31. Santu Mofokeng (Untitled) (No date available)

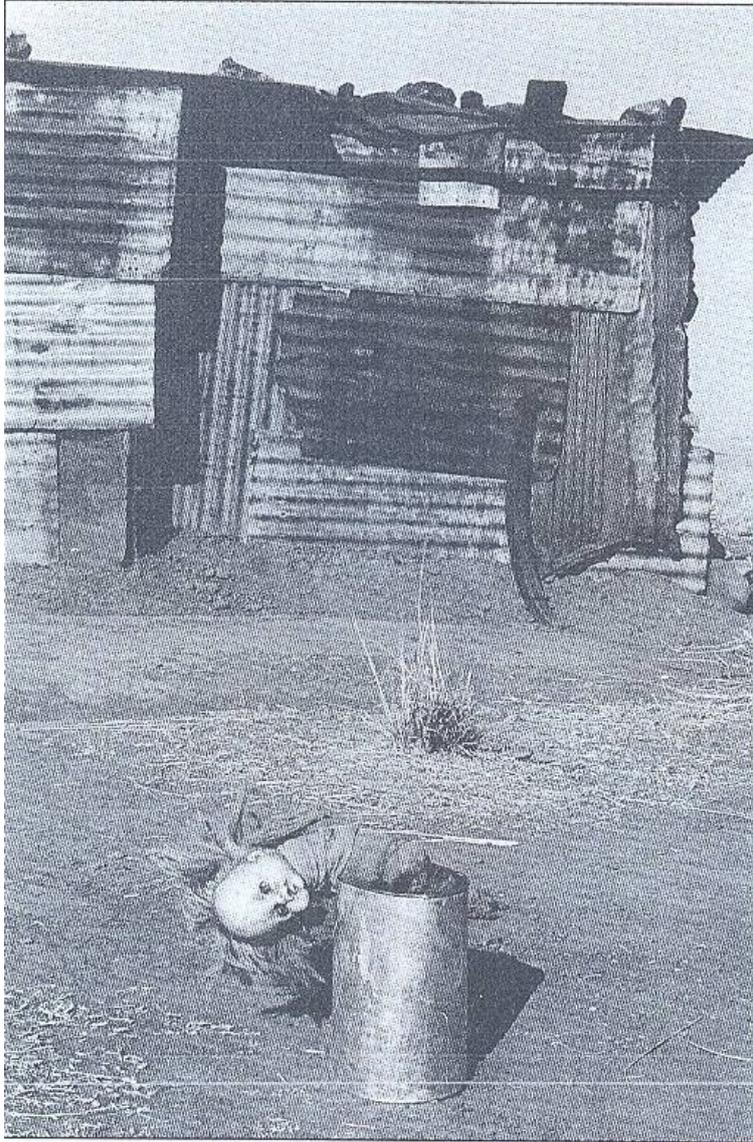


Figure. 32 Santu Mofokeng *Limbless doll*, Klippan (No Date available)

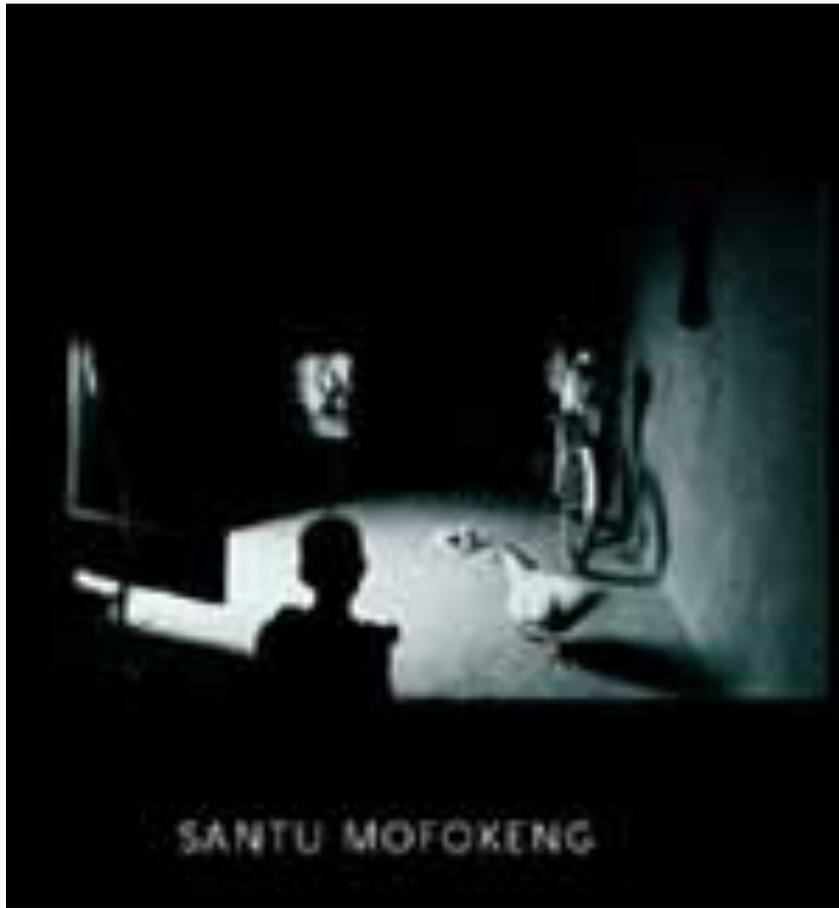


Figure. 33 Santu Mofokeng *A poor family bedroom* (No date Available)



Figure. 34 Santu Mofokeng *Untitled* (No date available)



Figure 35. Santu Mofokeng (*Untitled and no date available*)



Figure 36. Santu Mofokeng *Ishmael: Eyes wide shut motouleng caves, Clarens, 2004*



Figure 37. Santu Mofokeng *Ishmael: motouleng caves, Clarens, 2004*



Figure 38. Santu Mofokeng *Train Church* (1980s)



Figure 39. Santu Mofokeng *Train Church* (1980s)

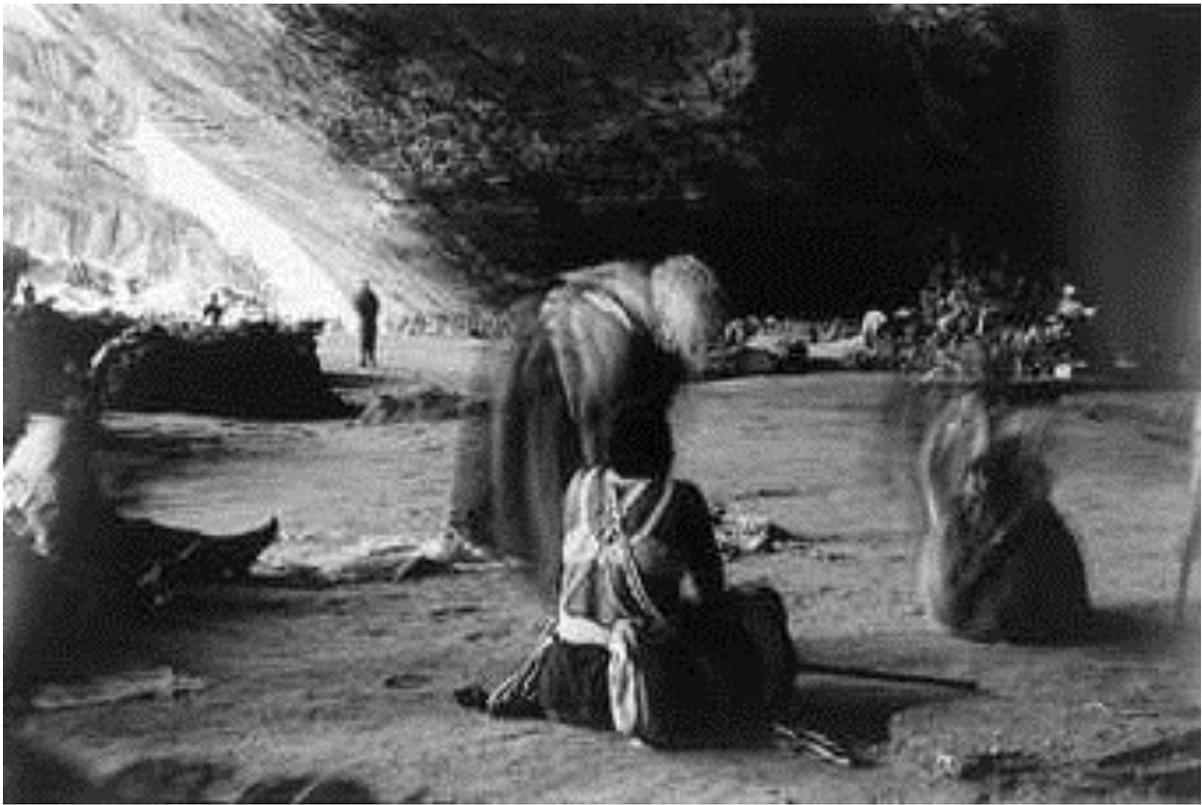


Figure 40. Santu Mofokeng *Chasing Shadows* 1997

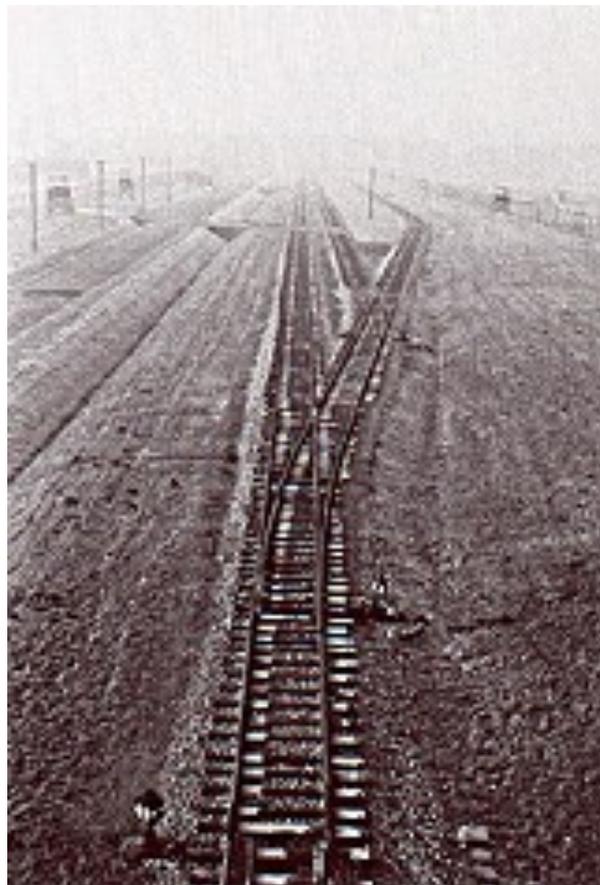


Figure 41. Santu Mofokeng *“Where did the road lead when it led nowhere* 1997



Figure 42. Moshekwa Langa (*Untitled*) 1996



Figure 43. Moshekwa Langa *The mountains of my youth: A Novel* 1996 Installation view

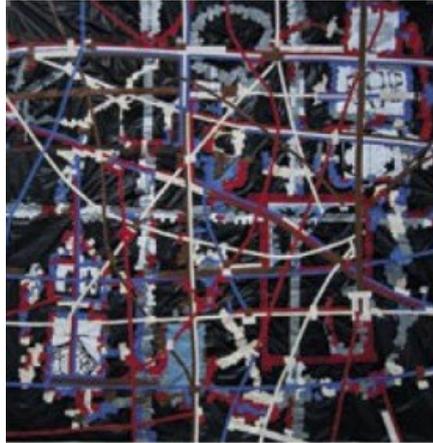


Figure 44. Moshekwa Langa (*Untitled and no date available*)



Figure 45. Moshekwa Langa *Collapsing guides* 2000-2003



Figure 46. Moshekwa Langa (*Untitled*) 2004



Figure 47. Moshekwa Langa *Home Movies: Where do I begin* 2001 (still picture)



Figure 48. Raymond Louis Kayanja, *Whoosh* (2008). Digitally manipulated photographic images, 41x30cm.

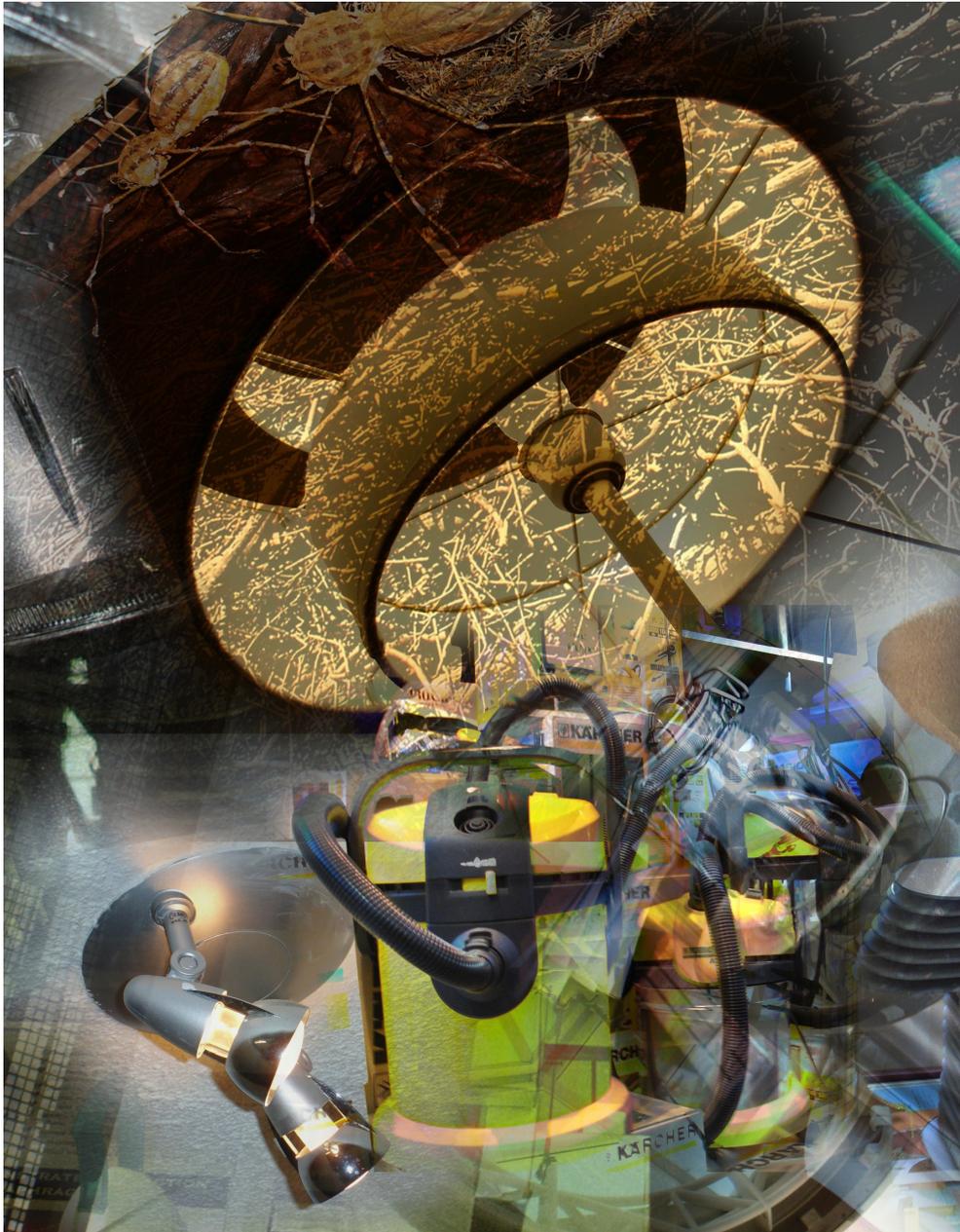


Figure 49. Raymond Louis Kayanja, *Strange Visions* (2008). Digitally manipulated photographic images, 77x60cm.

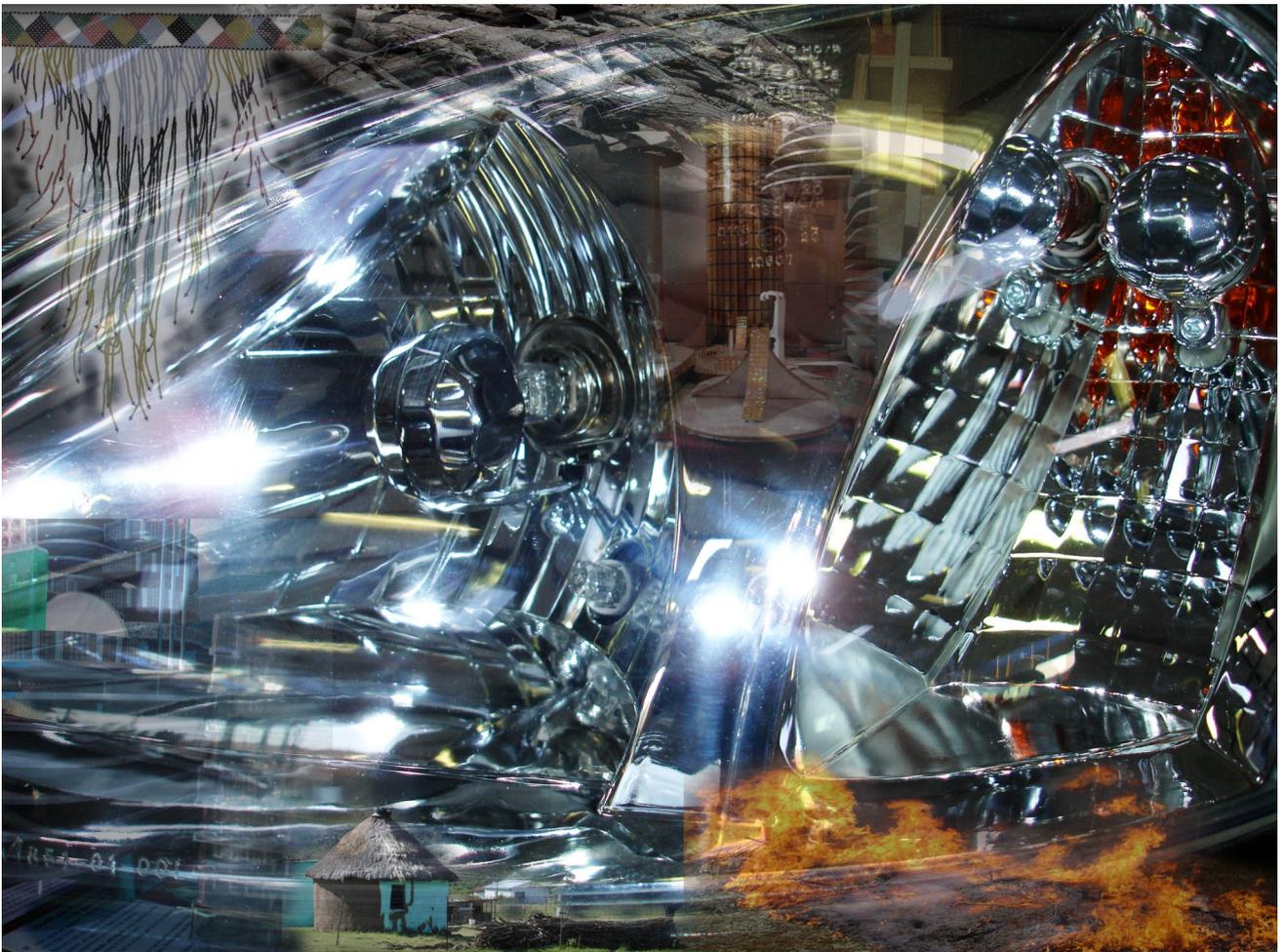


Figure 50. Raymond Louis Kayanja, *Through the Virtual Eye* (2008). Digitally manipulated photographic images, 77x60cm.



Figure 51: Raymond Louis Kayanja, *Paradise City* (2008). Digitally manipulated photographic images, 77x60cm.



Figure 52. Raymond Louis Kayanja, *No way Out* (2008). Digitally manipulated photographic images, 77x60cm.

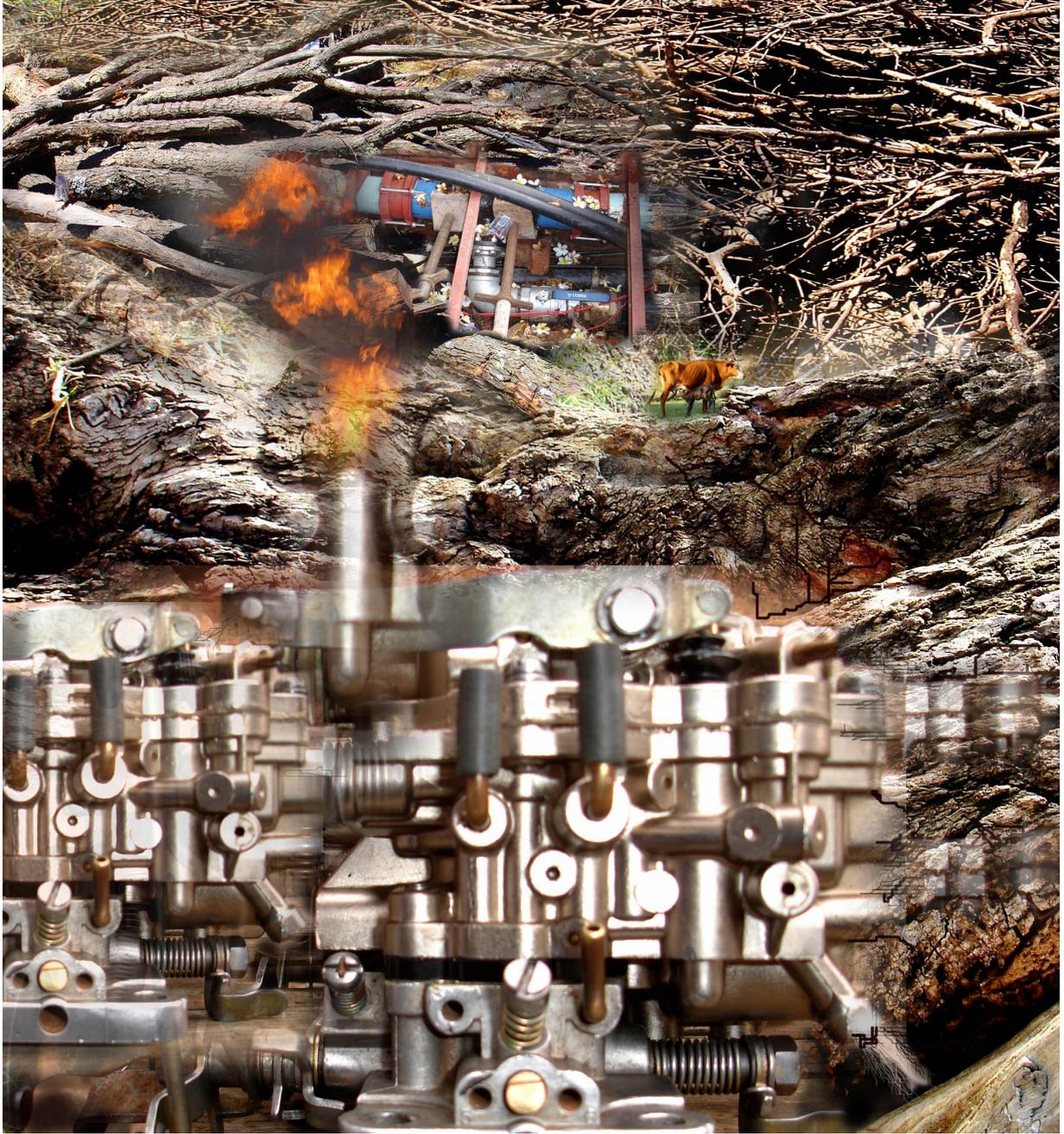


Figure 53. Raymond Louis Kayanja, *Bone Dry* (2008). Digitally manipulated photographic images, 65x60cm.



Figure 54 Raymond Louis Kayanja, *Forever Young* (2008). Digitally manipulated photographic images, 77x60cm.



Figure 55. Raymond Louis Kayanja, *New Torrents* (2008). Digitally manipulated photographic images, 41x30cm.



Figure 56. Raymond Louis Kayanja, *The spirit of the current* ( 2008). Digitally manipulated photographic images, 41x30cm.



Figure 57. Raymond Louis Kayanja, *Transporting the baggage of my memory* ( 2008). Digitally manipulated photographic images, 41x30cm.



Figure 58. Raymond Louis Kayanja, *You and me* (2008). Digitally manipulated photographic images, 33x30cm.

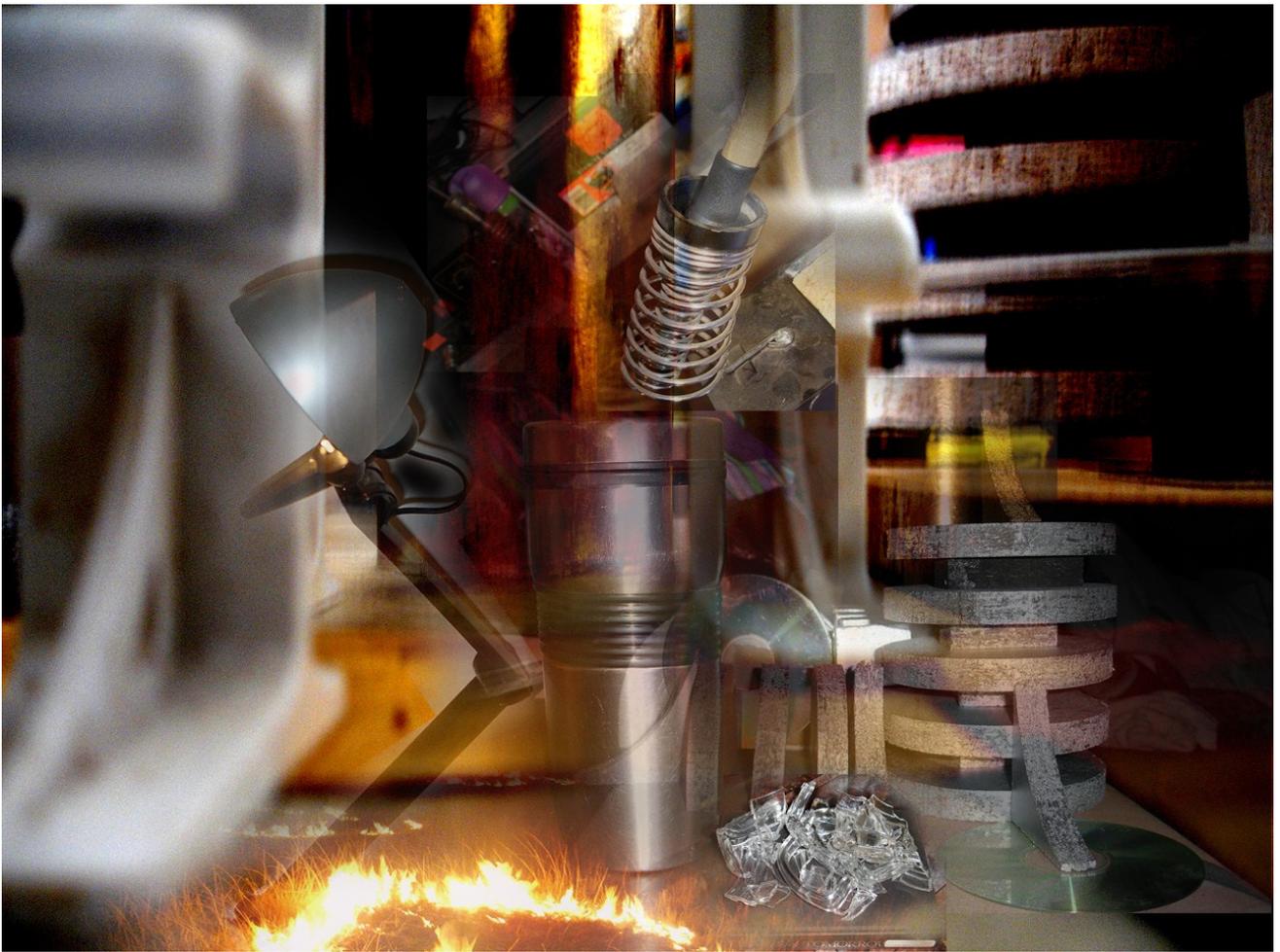


Figure 59. Raymond Louis Kayanja, *Knock Knock* ( 2008). Digitally manipulated photographic images, 41x30cm.



Figure 60. Raymond Louis Kayanja, *Ooops* (2008). Digitally manipulated photographic images, 33x30cm.



Figure 61. Raymond Louis Kayanja, *In Transit* ( 2008). Digitally manipulated photographic images, 41x30cm



Figure 62. Raymond Louis Kayanja, *Browsing around* (2008). Digitally manipulated photographic images, 41x30cm