Introduction

[Dance] has been a way of making art that embraces the complexity of living in a South African city – with all the contradiction and grain that may not always sit well in the stomach
(Pather in Krouse 2003: 2)

This thesis is a layered ethnographic analysis and story of the creation of one work by the South African contemporary dancer and choreographer Gregory Maqoma. It is a thematic exploration of his choreography in the context of a changing South Africa. His work is fascinating because of its style and the challenges he poses to society in its content. This choreography is a marker of shifts in new South African dance. What adds to its potency is the man himself. Maqoma’s personal history has much to tell us about changes in post-apartheid South Africa. This research is therefore as much about one artist’s body of work and creative process as it is about the broader social, political and historical context. The central focus is on the conversation between art and society. From this perspective, Maqoma’s work raises questions about how to define an ‘African’ aesthetic while avoiding the essentialising trap of authenticity, but exploring the connections between identity and embodiment, power and cultural production.

I was first introduced to Maqoma’s choreography through Sylvia Glasser1, whom I met in 1998. That was the beginning of my academic interest in South African contemporary dance. In 2003, when I began conceptualising this study, there was very little research being done on this topic. In the face of the AIDS pandemic, controversial land reforms and issues of race, for example, dance is not a top priority on the research agenda. Dance is also often judged through the simplistic dichotomy of mind/body, rational/irrational,

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1 Glasser is known as one of the groundbreakers in dance in this country. In 1978, in the context of laws such as the Immorality and Group Areas Acts of 1950, and the Separate Amenities and Bantu Education Acts of 1953, Glasser brought dancers of then legally segregated races together to perform in the afro-fusion style in her company – *Moving Into Dance Mophatong* (MIDM). This style of dance is a mix of traditional African dance with her own kind of modern dance that was influenced by her training in Canada and the United States. At the time of its conception in the late seventies, this way of dancing was a controversial commentary on the apartheid context within which she was working. Hers has been described as the first ‘multi-racial’ contemporary dance company in Johannesburg.
thinking/feeling as a physical activity and is thereby not seen as a valid intellectual project (Doolittle and Flynn 2000: xv). In addition, dance practitioners in a range of fields from choreography to arts marketing do not have the luxury of time or money to document their work. Dance has a reputation for being a niche area with little relevance to wider social and political questions. This stems from a narrow view that there is no practicality to the commentary that art makes about society. My thesis begs to differ. As will become clear in the course of the thesis, dance is a significant site for fruitful discussion on issues of identity, nationality, and the relationship between the body and society. It raises vital questions about the tensions between the individual and the community, the state and civil society, and the notion of freedom. The challenge of research on dance, which this thesis takes on, is that it is an embodiment of these issues at the most tangible and yet ephemeral levels.

**Dance sites**

Performances and relations within the dance community take place in many spaces, even for the creation of one work. Dancers travel to the studios and then disperse at the end of the day to their respective homes. Rehearsals take place in a variety of spaces depending on the stage of development of the work. In this study I chose to remain largely within the space where the dancers and choreographer met each day. My primary site was therefore the *Moving Into Dance Mophatong* (MIDM) building in Newtown. I also followed Maqoma to meetings and rehearsals he had in Rosebank and Yeoville in Johannesburg, and the State Theatre in Pretoria. I met with his management team in his home in Lyndhurst; and spent many hours over lunch and coffee with the MIDM dancers and a range of other dance practitioners and administrators around Newtown. The Wits Theatre became my primary site when the choreography moved there for the performance. For additional insights into the context of the performing arts industry in South Africa, I conducted interviews with arts practitioners and activists in Durban and

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2 There are few exceptions, one being journalist Adrienne Sichel’s enormous contribution to the documentation of arts in this country over the past 20 years, and a recent project by the Performing Arts Network of South Africa (PANSA) to publish a book on ten years of dance in this country from 1995-2005

3 *Mophatong* is Sotho for initiation lodge, which can also be interpreted as school
Cape Town, and have served on the Gauteng provincial and national committees of the Performing Arts Network of South Africa (PANSA)\(^4\), which met monthly in Newtown, Johannesburg.

Methodology: The dance of ethnography

Ethnography is an embodied experience. Stoller’s (1989) ethnographic work on Niger emphasises the importance of sensory experience in the field, while Ness (1996) writes about the immediate, mutual and intimate nature of ethnographic relationships and argues for the recall of bodily memory in the creation of the text. An anthropologist must be immersed in the field in order to attempt an emic understanding (even though this is

\(^4\) PANSA is a national non-governmental organisation (NGO) that works to lobby government on behalf of artists, create links between arts practitioners and develop a sustainable arts industry in South Africa. It was formed in 2002 and at the time of this research had committees in seven of the nine South African provinces. Its membership base consisted of individuals and organisations in the performing arts and totalled about 3000
never entirely possible), and must have the ability to step back for an objective analysis of data collected in this way (cf. Turnbull 1990). Much of this data is based on relationships that develop in the field between the anthropologist and the informants (cf. Cesara 1982; Okely & Callaway et al. 1992; Bell, Caplan & Karim et al. 1993; Kulick & Willson et al. 1995; and Lareau & Shultz et al. 1996). This is not an innocent exchange – all ethnographers are “positioned subjects” and all informants use the ethnographer’s presence to reflect on themselves (cf. Fabian 1990, Hastrup 1992). Informants are as ethnocentric as the anthropologist.

With this in mind, I began my fieldwork in July 2003 at the Grahamstown National Arts Festival by making contact with a range of dance practitioners. It was the beginning of my relationship with Maqoma, as I followed him on his tour of South Africa for his work *Ketima*. Towards the end of 2003, Maqoma began to make plans for *Virtually Blond*, the choreography that became the focus of this research. The reason for this was the coordination of this project with Maqoma’s choreographic schedule, and was fortuitous because of the relationship that I had already established at MIDM. On 7 January 2004, Maqoma and MIDM officially began their work on this choreography. Rehearsals continued each afternoon, Monday to Friday until 26 March 2004, except for interruptions caused by other rehearsals for the *Dance Umbrella*5. Between April and June 2004 MIDM and VDT toured extensively, but on 12 July 2004, rehearsals for *Virtually Blond* resumed. At the premier of the work on 17 August 2004, the MIDM second year students administered a questionnaire as a marketing and ethnographic tool, and conducted informal interviews with audience members before and after the performances.

Ethnography is as much about observation as it is about participation. During this time, my fieldwork was primarily centred on participant-observation, predominantly during the rehearsal process, but also including time outside of the dance studio at performances, meetings, and formal and informal gatherings. I spent hours on the studio floor taking

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5 The *Dance Umbrella* is an annual contemporary national dance festival at which local and international professional choreographers showcase their work. It is one of the few platforms for professional contemporary dance in South Africa
fieldnotes on the rehearsal process including dialogues, movements, and the interactions between individuals. I had also been attending open dance classes with MIDM from April 2003, and was invited to attend classes with the performance company from July, some of which were taught by Maqoma. There were two main reasons for attending the classes. First, these were crucial to the relationships that I was developing with the performers in Virtually Blond. Second, because of the importance of embodied knowledge for research discussed above.

I conducted focus groups and semi-structured and unstructured interviews with Maqoma, the performers and other dance practitioners, publicists, arts activists, designers (lighting, costume, set), managers and technicians. Many of these took place at a wide variety of contemporary dance performances around the country. At these events, I made contact with international choreographers from Switzerland, Belgium, Mozambique, the DRC, Zimbabwe, Canada, and Nigeria. Other events that I attended because they have bearing on the broader context of this project were the range of contemporary performing arts festivals including: the 969 festival, the Women in Arts festival, the New Dance Festival in Johannesburg, and the Jomba! Dance Festival and conference in Durban.

In order to write this ethnography, I have therefore used a range of sources. These include dance performances, architecture, costumes, set designs, photographs, video recordings, posters, music, interviews, dance programmes, literature and newspapers. Adshead-Lansadale and Layson (1994: 18-21) explain the importance of these performance-related and text-based resources in writing about dance. Although this is an anthropological study, I am drawing on a multidisciplinary framework because dance as a topic is not easily limited to one disciplinary approach. The focus, however, is on an ethnography of one choreographer’s experiences and the questions that his work raises. Writing in this way is best understood as a series of conversations (which are not necessarily symmetrical in their power dynamics).

The writing process is one such conversation (cf. Bateson 1972, Geertz 1995). With the “postmodern shift” in anthropology in the 1980s, the benchmark collection Writing
Culture (Clifford and Marcus et al 1986) emphasised that the ethnographic text must not be mistaken for a transparent window onto reality. It is a representation of an experience and a “contextualised truth” (Hastrup 1992). One remedy to this is to write reflexively. However, anthropology is not only a reflective process of representation. The power dynamics in the production of the text, the position of the anthropologist, and the interpretation of meaning are also central elements in anthropological practice. This requires a tricky balance between indulgent navel-gazing and a commitment to the responsibility of writing. Ethnography is therefore about responsibility, sensitivity and exploration. One way of achieving this is through loyalty to a grounded description as the basis for analysis. As Sontag (2001: 13) believes, valuable “acts of criticism” are those “which would supply a really accurate, sharp, loving description of the appearance of a work of art”. The core of this thesis, then, is a conversation about one artist’s work, the relationship between this and South African society, and the questions that it raises.

**Literature review**

Maqoma’s work demands an understanding of five key issues: 1) dance is a powerful commentary on society, 2) aesthetics are political, 3) the idea of ‘Africa’ is problematic, as is that of ‘authenticity’, 4) transgression in art reinforces its potential to provoke, and 5) the body is a central medium of signification and communication. This is because, as this thesis will demonstrate, he critiques South African society through a style, content and use of the body that are unsettling. Maqoma works against the idea that there is an authentic African representation, and against the notion of purity. His hybrid form of dance deals with the contradictions of the new regime, and forces us to face questions about freedom and what it means. His work shows that the performing arts are essential to dialogue in a new democracy, and thereby crystallizes the relationship between art and society – the central focus of this thesis. The review below takes this relationship as its basis, begins with an introduction to approaches in dance studies, and extends into an overview of the relevant literature in each of the key issues outlined above.
Dance studies

Approaches to dance

The focus of this thesis is not on definitions of dance, contemporary or otherwise. This is because of the fluidity of categories of dance types and the problem of the cross-cultural application of terms. There are arguments, for instance, about the inappropriateness of western conceptions of dance to non-European dance forms. For example, if the southern Nigerian Bini word *iku* were to be translated as “dance”, it would exclude the range of other meanings to which this term refers, such as play, games, music and song (Gore 1994: 59). This argument has been well documented in the anthropology of dance (cf. Blacking 1983: 89, Kaeppler 1985, Spencer 1985, Williams 1991). The same can be said for ‘modern dance’, which Huxley (1994: 152) reveals has referred to “different types of dances at different times”. The meaning of this phrase has shifted from “dance of the time” (including ballet) to “German dance” in Germany in 1933, to a category distinct from ballet, to a genealogical approach highlighting the work of particular American dancers in the 60s and 70s, and a focus on European dancers in the 80s (ibid: 151-153).

The approach in this thesis is therefore a grounded ethnography of the work of one choreographer and his social, political and historical context. It is not a dance history, of which there are many kinds (cf. Adshead-Lansdale and Layson 1994). It is about the relationship between art and society examined through Maqoma’s choreography in the context of South Africa. This emphasis on the role of choreographers in society is not new in dance studies. Chronological histories of western modern dance abound with analyses of the lives and choreographies of significant figures. These are often discussed as turning points in the history of dance and social ideology. Jowitt (1994: 171) relates American choreographers of the 20s and 30s, such as Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey, to the Expressionist art movement, which focused on emotion as the guiding force behind the creation of movement. In expressing emotion, art thereby articulated the intangible. Copeland (1994: 182) describes Cunningham as a formalist whose work was
akin to the “New Critics” in literary theory. In the 80s western dance returned to a focus on narrative and text, but from a deconstructionist perspective. The significance of choreographers in Judson Dance Theatre to post-modern dance is studied in depth by Banes (1983). What these studies introduce is the relationship between key dance practitioners and their social contexts, an approach that is carried through this thesis.

Dance and culture

A key element in the approach of this research is the centrality of dance to analyses of culture. This is because of the way in which art speaks to its context. Maqoma’s work, for instance, is a social commentary on the implications of change in South African society. Dance ethnographers critique the classic ethnographies in anthropology for ignoring the central role that dance has played in culture (cf. Royce 1977: 38, Novack 1990: 7, Cowan 1990: 5, Kaeppler 1978, Ness 1992: 239). In general this is true. However, there are exceptions (cf. Epstein 1981, James 1992 & 1997, Mitchell 1956, Ranger 1975). One of the earliest of these is Evans-Pritchard’s (1928) analysis of the gbere buda (beer dance) of the Azande of Sudan. Although Evans-Pritchard does not apply his explanation to actual movements or “dance elements”, his study was groundbreaking because of his focus on dance as the “occasion” and on the importance of the “dancing body” for cultural analysis (Ness 1996: 247-252). However, dance as the subject of study in contemporary anthropology on Africa has not been highlighted. It is one of the “oldest” arts and yet has the shortest history of academic documentation (Middleton in Williams 1997: 152).

Studies that take the relationship between dance and culture seriously include Hanna (1987) and Kaeppler (1967, 1972, 1978). Hanna (1987: 8-12) traces the history of anthropological studies on dance from the functionalist focus on the place of dance in social systems, through the structuralist emphasis on patterns of elements of movement, to contemporary studies. In her view, these studies explore dance as an instrument of communication that expresses, negotiates and contests identity. Kaeppler (1967, 1972) borrows from structural linguistics to analyse the dance-object on the levels of the
kinetic, the “kineme”, the “morphokineme”, the “motif” and the “dance genre” (Ness 1996: 259). The value of her work lies in her focus on the meaning that insiders give to their own movement. The same can be said for Williams (1977) and Meduri (1988) who both concentrate on the contextual aspects of dance.

The work of ethnographers of the 70s such as Williams (1977) and Kealiinohomoku (1970) challenged the essentialised, evolutionist and teleological view of dance as natural behaviour that originated in ‘primitive’ cultures and developed into a more ‘civilised’ western theatre dance (Thomas 2003: 79). In this view, dance is brought into relationship with culture without the hierarchies of us/them or west/other. Building on these key works, the 90s are described by Desmond (1997:1) as the decade of dance scholarship, which brought attention to questions of social power, embodiment and context. Work such as that of Daniel (1995) on rumba, Washabaugh (1996) on flamenco, Browning (1995) on the samba, Savigliano (1995) and Taylor (1998) on tango move beyond historical narrative to accounts of the embodied experiences of those who dance. Multidisciplinary explorations of these same themes are characteristic of dance scholarship since the 90s (cf. Foster et al 1996, Desmond et al 1997, Thomas 1995 & 1997), where “the collusion of history and theory … occurs where bodies, modernisms, and politics emerge in practice as dancing” (Franko 1996: 45-46).

The application of this approach to the relationship between contemporary dance and culture in South Africa is scarce (if it exists at all). There is work on popular dance, but very little published literature on the professional contemporary genre (exceptions include Hagemann 1990; Loots 2001; and Pather 1990). Choreographic work, dance spaces, histories of dance companies, and the experiences of choreographers have been documented in postgraduate research, for example, Frege (1994), Finestone-Praeg (1995), Pieniaar (1996), Ballantyne (1998), Ginslov (1998), Castelyn (2001), and Snyman (2003). Additionally, there is the journalism of Adrienne Sichel, Zingi Mkefa, Matthew Krouse, Robin Sassen and more recently Robert Grieg; and the writing of choreographers about their own work, which often remains in archived papers at their offices (exceptions include Confluences 2 & 3; Glasser 1996; and the First Physical Theatre company
CD-ROM, for example). However, apart from these sources, and van Graan and Ballantyne’s (2002-2003) *The South African Handbook on Arts & Culture*, there is no academic literature on contemporary dance in South Africa, especially not in Anthropology. This thesis therefore faces the challenge of documenting dance in a context where there are pockets of research, but no major ongoing academic projects. It has been an opportunity to record new data, and to analyse it using the lessons of the dance ethnographers discussed above. These include the importance of grounding the moving body in its cultural context, and emphasising the relationship between an artwork and the politics surrounding it.

**Art and society**

It is not the aim of this thesis to define ‘art’, as has been attempted in a range of work (cf. Danto, Gramly, Hultgren, Schildkrout, Zeidler & Vogel 1989), but rather to explore the meanings attached to artistic practice in contemporary South Africa for those involved in creating artwork. The creative process is therefore central to this discussion in which Abbs’s (1989) outline of the phases in art making provides a useful framework. The anthropology of art, by contrast, is less useful even though it has historically taken as its subject matter ways in which art objects are created, used and valued within cultures, and broadly addresses issues of aesthetics, symbolism, function and representation (cf. Otten *et al* 1971, Layton 1981). Within this realm of anthropological study, the category ‘African art’ most often refers to material culture and art objects – the ‘crafts’ of particular cultures. There are numerous studies of this sort, for example, the work of Boas (1955) on the traits of ‘primitive art’, Delange (1967) on geographical descriptions of art objects in context, Anderson (1979) on the meaning and function of ‘primitive art’, and Brain (1980) on the relationship between art and society. The notion of ‘authentic primitive art’ that underpins these studies, the focus of which was understood in heavily evolutionist terms as the culture of non-western, pre-industrial, pre-bureaucratic states (Westermann 2005: viii), is key to this study, particularly in terms of the aesthetic

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6 The challenges to research on dance are in parallel with the obstacles that choreographers face in creating their work. The problems that these performing artists have to deal with will be explored in detail in chapter five, but is also a theme that runs through this thesis.
evaluation of artworks in relation to their political context. The specific focus here is on the way in which Maqoma’s work is judged according to notions of what it means to be ‘African’, as will be elaborated later.

Westermann (2005: ix) makes the same arguments about anthropology’s approach to art in the twentieth century as dance historians make about anthropology’s approach to dance – seeing art as a way in to a discussion of other issues, for example kinship and exchange, rather than a central topic in itself. Gell (in Westermann ibid: xxvii) argues that:

> current anthropological theories of art are not anthropological theories but rather attempts to transfer a Western philosophy of art grounded in eighteenth century aesthetics and Western art institutions to ‘primitive’ societies to which such theory does not apply.

The conceptual boundaries of ‘African’ and ‘western’ are fuzzy at best, and complicated by the history of colonisation in Africa. What this thesis emphasises is the role of the artist in society and their positioning according to ideas of what is African and what is Western. Work on aesthetics in philosophy and its origins in linguistics does not therefore have direct bearing on this study, even though it is critical to the aesthetics debate (cf Eagleton 1990, Bernstein 1992, Hanfling 1992, Cazeaux et al 2000).

In dance, McFee (1992: 2), who is widely published in the area of the aesthetics, emphasises three ideas of philosophical aesthetics: the role of definition, the question of the subjectivity of judgements of dance, the distinction between artistic and aesthetic judgement. His rigorous investigation of these and other key issues in the aesthetics of dance is based on key texts by Best (1974, 1978 & 1985), Sparshott (1988), and Ground (1989). This is one of the only serious explorations of the aesthetics of dance. Other authors focus on the stylistic elements of movement in terms of space, rhythm and steps for example, that form the criteria for its categorisation (cf. Hanna 1972, 1997, 2001 & 2003). I examine the links between the aesthetic and social criteria on which judgements of art works are based. Although I do not focus specifically on the philosophy of aesthetics, I do analyse how an African aesthetic comes to be defined –and contested - within a particular social and political context. For this thesis, my interest lies in the
narrative that the sequence of movements in time creates, not a general debate on beauty and judgements of taste. Aesthetics are, after all, political.

Art, Africa, authenticity

Dance literature is criticised for being generally Eurocentric, “superficial” and “patronizing” when it comes to writing on Africa and Asia (Adshead-Lansdale and Layson 1994: 33). Dils and Albright (2001: xv-xvi) describe how in western dance history programs of the 70s and 80s anything “ethnic” or “folk” was relegated to anthropology (and I use the verb ‘relegated’ deliberately). This distinction between ‘western’ and ‘folk’ dance reinforced a separation between what was defined as art and what was seen as social or religious. This thesis challenges the meaning of such definitions through a focus on the work of an ‘African’ choreographer who has incorporated ‘western post-modern’ dance influences into his work. There are parallels in the art versus craft debate where distinctions between ‘tradition’ and ‘innovation’ reinforce the west/other dichotomy. In this conception, ‘folk’ is other and traditional, and ‘western’ is associated with innovation.

There are tensions here within the idea of the West itself. When ‘folk’ is thought of as the ‘authentic’ representation of culture, another relationship is forged: that of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture. Folk dancing is supposed to be fixed and unchanging, and create a sense of community – it is seen as a model of dance “for a bunch of regular people…to do something together” (Acocella, 1998: 273). Innovation then belongs to a middle class that appropriates ‘tradition’ to set up an “authentic nationalism” (cf. Gellner 1983). These distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘low’ or ‘popular’ are about power that operate along the lines of who can define and who is defined (cf. Morphy 1995). Because folk dancing is supposed to be about repetition without any form of innovation, it is excluded from involving any kind of reflexivity that is expected from modern and contemporary dance. That is because contemporary dance is seen as a break from tradition. However, these are false distinctions set up to serve a hierarchy that depends on dichotomies of ‘high’ and ‘low’. The point need not be laboured that tradition is invented (cf. Ranger 1992), it is
implicated in the modern (and vice versa), and the ‘popular’ is in a dialectical relationship with the so-called ‘high’ and ‘low’ (cf. Coplan 1985, Erlmann 1991 & 1996, Glasser 1990 & 1993, Gunner 1994).

In South Africa, this has particular bearing on the idea of ‘Africa’ and the way in which official culture appeals to an essentialised image that is seen as ‘authentic’. As Fabian (2002) explains of the workings of modernity, the distinction between the ‘modern’ and the ‘primitive’ (or west/other, innovation/tradition) freezes the ‘other’ outside time so that it is excluded from progress and innovation. As will be shown in the thesis, those in positions of power predicate their ‘authentic’ identity on the performance of it by others. The performing arts become a machine that is expected to churn out an acceptable identity for a modern regime – such as South Africa’s new democracy. The irony is that it becomes a representation that works against the idea of progress and innovation. In the context of a puritanical nationalism such as that espoused by both the Nationalist Party (NP) and the African National Congress (ANC), it becomes the responsibility of the arts to carry tradition so that those in power have a reference point for their identity. Contemporary performing artists are therefore forced to fit the mould of kitsch sentimentality about Africa or work against an establishment that will only support them if they represent an acceptable Africanness. Maqoma’s work raises these tensions and exposes the hypocrisies that are the result of such cultural defensiveness. I explore these ideas predominately in chapter two.

What this discussion reveals is that the seemingly straightforward idea of what is African is at best a political and politically expedient concept that is open to creative fashioning (re)interpretation or manipulation. Appiah’s (1992) study of what it means to be ‘African’ prepared the ground for explorations into issues of identity, culture, politics and race in relation to modernity and the postcolony (cf. Mudimbe 1994, Appadurai 1995, Mbembe 2001). A key collection of works in new studies of culture and identity in ‘post-apartheid’ South Africa is Kriger and Zegeye (2001). Highlighted here are the themes of space and activity, identity, and cultural production and its relationship to the state. Other works that address these issues are Werbner and Ranger et al (1996) focusing on identity

Coplan (2003) notes how the idea of ‘African’ became popular in South African music in the early 1990s when South Africa was opened to the rest of Africa and central, west and east African influences penetrated local production. What emerged from this was a kind of stereotypical ‘Africa’ (and a sense that Africa started outside South Africa’s borders). This raises questions of ‘authenticity’ and its relationship to ‘ownership’: who owns the means of cultural production, and what the effects are of processes of production on artistic creation (cf. Coplan 1983). A particular problem is the effect of money on present issues of artistic production. As Maqoma’s experience will show, there are few options available to performing artists today in terms of their livelihood. In a context where art is seen as superfluous and light entertainment, it is supported when it does not critique the contradictions mentioned above. Although there was a critique of the regime in the struggle against apartheid, artists today no longer have a clear enemy or simple way of positioning themselves in society. If they subscribe to the stereotype of Africa, they will be faced with less resistance.

The struggle against apartheid was a revolution about race and class, but not directly a sexual or social revolution that reconstituted age relations or gender. Women (like artists) are still seen as the bearers of ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’ (cf. Ortner 1974, Moore 1988). By questioning what South Africa is today, Maqoma is also showing aspects of what the struggle was about. In his work he is questioning the extent to which the ‘new’ South Africa is about the ownership of the State by a set of asymmetries that in many ways mirror those of the old regime. Art in this view is therefore about unsettling the status quo, because it has the potential to disrupt (cf. Eco 1984). It is about the possibility

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7 See, for example, Salo’s interview with Kadalie in Mama, Pereira and Manuh (2005), who states, “struggles around gender and sexuality were rendered illegitimate among ‘progressives’ in South Africa’s struggle against apartheid for national liberation”
and necessity for art to call these contradictions into question and “speak truth to power” (Said 2001: 420).

**Transgression and hybridity**

A key idea here is the notion of transgression in the relationship between so-called ‘high’ and ‘low’ forms of cultural expression. Popular culture has previously been thought of as the antithesis of ‘high culture’. Within this framework, Marxist theorists of the Frankfurt School (cf. Adorno 1991) emphasise what they describe as the negative effects of ‘mass culture’, while studies on subcultural genres, for example youth cultures (cf. Hebdige 1979) focus on ways in which these ‘cultures’ negotiate dominant culture. However, in everyday practice, these distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘low’, ‘mass’ and ‘popular’ are blurred (MacCabe 1986). Zipes’s *et al* (1986) work on the distinction between folk and fairtales in France and Germany, for example, shows how the category of ‘high’ culture is a construction of – and appropriation by - the middle classes. Barber’s (1997) introductory chapter draws popular culture from the peripheries of scholarship on the arts to the centre of inquiry into the liminal spaces between the so-called ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’. Throughout this volume are examples of such inquiries from Coplan’s (1997) “eloquent knowledge” to Mbembe’s (1986) “cameroonian cartoons”, and a diversity of popular cultural forms in Africa in-between. Most valuable to this thesis, however, is Stallybrass and White’s (1986) work on the centrality of transgressive modes of expression to the politics of identity.

Of particular pertinence to this research is the idea of ‘mixing’. Popular cultural forms of expression are, in their essence, ‘mixed’, hybrid, and fashioned out of the syncretism of elements. Syncretism is understood to mean a blend of elements that also produces something entirely new. Processes of ‘mixing’ have been described in a number of ways. An example is the notion of ‘creolization’, as discussed by Fabian (1978), and criticised by Parkin (1993). Also relevant is the notion of hybridity, which Seirlis (1999) examines.

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8 A useful concept here is that of *hegemony*, for example in the work of Gramsci (cf. Fontana 1993)
9 cf. Gellner (1983)
in her study of coloured identity in Rhodesia (and Zimbabwe). Literature on hybridity includes Vaughan’s (1991) analysis of the colonies, postcolonial deconstructions of the term (cf. Bakhtin 1981, Bhabha 1994), and critiques of these views in Young (1995) and Papastergiadis (2002). This is particularly important because Maqoma’s work is a hybrid form that is threatening to the essentialised images of Africa discussed above. It is through the themes in his work and his stylistic mix of elements that he subverts the norm and works against an idea of purity that underpins the national project of multiculturalism in South Africa.

In this way, his work can be likened to carnival. Ethnography on this topic illustrates the subversive effects when class, race, gender and power are played with through the mixing of identity markers in street performances (cf. Parker 1991, Regis 1999, Martin 2000). In dance debates on the issue of ‘cultural exchange’, the concepts of ‘interculturalism’ and ‘fusion’ emerge (cf. Govender 1997, Glasser 1993). These ideas have particular potency within the rhetoric of local-global debates. Contemporary dance moves between the local and the global and back, only to move again, and is dynamically created and recreated in this process. It is a genre that is based on the continual redefinition of the model, rather than fulfilling its codes (as in ballet for example). It is therefore a particularly polyvalent form of dance. The syncretism that lies at the heart of this kind of artistic praxis can be understood in terms of Appadurai’s (1991) notion of “ethnoscapes”. Here, identities are assembled through the meeting and movement of “travelers” (tourists, refugees, exiles) across and over the landscape. This thesis includes performing artists in this mix.

An idea that lies within this discussion of hybridity as threat is the potential of art to disrupt (cf. Eco 1984). It is Maqoma’s aim to work against the machine of performing arts described above. He places himself in a range of roles, one of which is to break the order of things. In this way he is an anarchist, like the Italian playwright Dario Fo, whose theatre was deliberately anti-bourgeois and anti-cathartic (cf. Fo 1980). One problem with this approach in the South African context is the role of the audience. The statement about society that Maqoma makes is one side of the communicative process. The other is the question of who is listening. Maqoma wants to implicate the audience, but his
anarchism is limited by a generally disengaged contemporary dance following (where one exists). The audience is not the focus of this study, but it is an important aspect of performance and its potential. Schechner (1985) adds insight into issues of participation and audience-performer interactions, and the importance of studying the “whole performance sequence” (cf. also Hanna 1983).

**Meaning and communication: The moving body**

The discussion of the role of the audience points to the notion of dance as communicative. It carries meaning and communicates this in a signifying process – and I will discuss the definitions of and differences between meaning, communication and signification in greater detail in chapter four. The body is the dancer’s medium and so the dancer’s medium of signification. The problem with certain ethnographic approaches to the body in dance is that they ignore this by disembodying the subject. Kaeppler’s approach, according to Ness (1996: 260-261), is an example of this limited perspective on the body. For instance, Kaeppler analyses the body as “evidence…of common human identity” (ibid: 260). The problem with this view is that it does not allow for a culturally immersed body. By contrast, Meduri (1998), in her study of Bharata Natyam that focuses on the tensions between the traditional Indian figure and the contemporary professional dancer takes a reflexive approach to her own dancing body. In her words, “the dancer’s body in this way…contains not only observable moving parts, but a personality as well, a body that makes theory, has pain, and questions with feeling its cultural predicament” (in Ness 1996: 263).

For Csordas (in Thomas 2003: 63) dance is “a somatic mode of attention, which engages reflexively with the body in movement and stillness”. What this means is that dance is an essential site for the analysis of a fluid body – a body that moves, that engages, that represents, that interacts. In Bharata Natyam, for example, it is the “performance by one dancing body of nṛtta (non-narrative sculpturesque poses and movements) that produces rasa (aesthetic delight) in spectator bodies” (Meduri in Ness 1996: 263). Here, the body is the centre of social experience and meaning. The same is true for an analysis of the
body in this thesis, which is about conversations: between the artist and his/her context, and the moving body and society. It is about how the body speaks to social issues. The key idea here is of the body as a sign that is unfixed and polyvalent. It is also more than a sign – it is an agent of communication. This thesis draws on Eco (1976, 1984) and Kristeva (1978, 1984) to explain how this process of signification works, and what its relevance is to a discussion about the moving body.

According to Thomas (2003: 24), interest in body language and dance as non-verbal communication arose out of communications theory in the 1950s. Teams of researchers from a range of disciplines, such as linguistics, psychiatry, and anthropology, wanted to develop a ‘scientific’ approach to this topic. Birdwhistell (cf 1953, 1973), for example, studied Labanotation as the foundation for his own method of notating body language. As a result of these studies, body movement was understood as a learnt form of communication, which is patterned within a culture and which can be broken down to an ordered system of isolable elements (Birdwhistell in Thomas 2003: 26).

Although this approach was criticised for its positivist bias (ibid: 25), it opened the way for studies of body movement as its own channel of communication, related to but separate from speech.

This view was a useful beginning, but still allowed for the domination of language over bodily movement for its interpretations. With developments in semiotics, Marxism, and psychoanalysis in Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, came a “crisis in representation” (cf Boyne and Rattansi 1990), which raised a critical awareness about human experience. Kristeva, for example, praised Birdwhistell for his analysis of gesture as a code that is not the same as language, but disapproved of his uncritical assumptions regarding the meanings of terms such as ‘truth’, ‘subject’, ‘perception’, and ‘human being’ (Thomas 2003: 27). For Kristeva, it is more valuable to view gesturality as a “semiotic text” that is “in the process of production” as a “signifying practice” (idem). In this way the meaning of bodily action is understood without the blockade of the “closed structures of language” (ibid: 28).
This research is therefore grounded in the idea that the historically-situated and culturally-contextualised moving body is the focus for an analysis of how people make meaning in their lives. Dance ethnography is unique in this sense because it involves “necessarily looking at the body and the body’s experiences” (Sklar 1991: 81). As one example of this approach to research, Sklar (1991) uses qualitative movement analysis to understand the religious experience of the Tortugas in Southern New Mexico. A key text on this topic is Thomas’s (2003) groundbreaking study in which she highlights the place of the body in culture through the integration of dance studies, cultural theory, anthropology and sociology. This work has a depth and breadth that covers historical debates on embodiment, and builds on this overview by engaging in the issues of dance research. These include the origins of mind/body and nature/culture dualisms in social science in the late 1800s (Thomas 2003: 13-17), the idea of the body as a social symbol (ibid: 18-23), concerns with nonverbal communication (ibid: 25-26), the signifying processes of bodily action (ibid: 27-28), phenomenology and embodied identity (ibid: 29-32). These issues are relevant to this thesis in three related areas: 1) the idea that the body is a social symbol (cf. Douglas 1973, Eagleton 1983), 2) the body creates and communicates meaning (cf. Eco 1976, 1984; Kristeva 1978, 1984), and 3) power relations are exercised through the body (cf. Foucault 1977, 1980; Stallybrass and White 1986).

Framing these themes is the relationship between the body and power. Directly or indirectly, Maqoma is addressing the asymmetries in power in post-apartheid South Africa. In this area, Alter’s (1993) study applies the idea of the culturally encoded body to an analysis of wrestling in India. Foucault (1977), Foster (1997) and Bryson (1997) provide a frame within which the body may be understood in terms of power, control and discipline; and Barteneiff and Lewis (1990) and Preston-Dunlop (1998) explore the body as one space that executes movement in another space. This thesis emphasises the importance of the way in which the body articulates the relationship between political ideology and everyday lived experience, particularly through the example of dance.
This study is based on my own experiences of dancing with the performers, but draws predominantly on my observations of their movements and interactions during the rehearsal and performance process. These are the basis for an analysis of: 1) their individual movement styles, 2) the different ways in which they embody Maqoma’s movements, 3) their descriptions of their own and each other’s bodies and 4) their descriptions of their movements. Using this data, this thesis examines the way in which the body makes and communicates meaning. It takes as its focus the role of the expressive body – a body in motion – within the framework of the relationship between art and society.

**Chapter Outline**

Chapter one opens with a discussion of who Maqoma is. It outlines his personal history and his repertoire of choreographic works within the context of South African society. This sets up the relationship between the artist and their broader social context that runs through the discussion that follows. What is important here is that the way in which Maqoma and his work are positioned in post-apartheid South Africa raises questions about identity, nationality, freedom and its limits. In particular, it examines the problematic idea of what is African and how choreographers, such as Maqoma, deal with this question. Chapter two is based on the case of the World Summit for Sustainable Development opening ceremony to illustrate just how contentious this issue can be. This chapter juxtaposes Maqoma’s choreography with the example of this ceremony to examine the idea of the hybrid as threatening to and transgressive of essentialised images of ‘Africa’. The central argument that begins in this chapter is: for an emerging democracy such as South Africa’s to be successful, it must engage with the reality of diversity. It proposes that contemporary dance offers a particular dialogue that is critical to such engagement.

The relationship between art and society is carried further through a discussion of Maqoma’s 2003 work *Virtually Blond*. Chapter three uses this example to examine the difficulties of meaning and interpretation in art. It shows how Maqoma creates work that
has the potential to be a disruptive commentary on the contradictions of democracy in South African society. Through his use of the moving body, he breaks with expectations about gender, sexuality and race. This analysis is drawn through chapter four where the body is examined as a medium of signification. The idea of dance speaking to its context is therefore a central thread in this thesis, which culminates in chapter five. What is central here is the problem for contemporary dance (often manifest in the practical difficulties of livelihood) in a ‘new’ South Africa that values art only insofar as it supports the state’s claims to a false authenticity. As a result, choreographers have few options available to them, one of which is to become a watchdog to the nation. What this chapter shows is that in choosing this role artists such as Maqoma do not have the luxury of creating art for art’s sake.