

THE POSTMODERN ASPECTS REFLECTED IN THE *QATSI* TRILOGY

by

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Postmodernism

Postmodernism is still an amorphous term and there is no absolute consensus as to what the term means. This is probably because it encompasses a wide range of issues and because it distances itself from any one truth that one may try to attach to it. Largely in Western societies, postmodern discourse proposes that society, culture and lifestyle are today significantly different from what they were a hundred or fifty years ago (Ward 1997:5). In his book *What is Postmodernism?*, Charles Jencks (1986:50) notes “There is enough statistical change in traditional areas of value to fill several sermons with comment and advice”. Issues that form the focus of attention in postmodernism include developments in mass media, consumer society and information technology.

Postmodernism suggests that more abstract matters such as meaning, identity and reality are affected by these new developments. It claims that new approaches are needed to describe the present and that old styles of analysis are no longer of use (Ward 1997:5).

Postmodernism can be said to have started in the 1950s to 1960s and continues today (Hart 2003:14; Lyotard 1979:3). As is suggested by the prefix ‘post’, postmodernism follows modernism, continuing certain trends, reacting to others and responding to new aspects arising or present in current times. Modernists believed in fixed truths and facts with which they were able with certainty and authority to produce sets of rules by which everyone could live, known as grand narratives or metanarratives. But, as Marshal McLuhan (1964:5) states in his book, *Understanding media*, while previously in the

industrial age of mechanisation, Western cultures had their favorite models of perception and knowledge that were prescribed to everybody, today there is a revulsion against such imposed patterns. Jencks (1986:50) states that, “those who have written on postmodernism have noted the ‘loss of authority’ which seems so characteristic of our age”. Similarly, the postmodern theorist Jean-François Lyotard (1979:15,37,38) has noted the decline in belief in these metanarratives and thus the way in which they are breaking up and losing credibility.

One such metanarrative is the discipline of science. Lyotard (1979) deconstructs science’s assumed status as a legitimising metanarrative over other narratives by pointing out that it cannot legitimate itself by its own scientific standards and that it in fact relies on these other ‘lesser’ narratives for its legitimation. Lyotard (1979:11) also questions the suitability of the political, economic and technological system brought about by science and modernity for humans, arguing that it is not a system that guarantees the hopes and needs of individuals or groups but only secures the “optimisation of the global relationship between input and output”, or in other words, ‘performativity’.

The contribution of metanarratives such as these to the rise of globalisation is significant. McLuhan (1964:5) became popular for his concept of the ‘global village’ and states: “As electrically contracted, the globe is no more than a village. Electronic speed in bringing all social and political functions together in a sudden implosion has heightened human awareness of responsibility, to an intense degree.” McLuhan, with Fiore, in the title of their book, coined the phrase “the medium is the message” (McLuhan & Fiore 1967).

What they mean is that the medium itself is important and not the 'content'. The medium is any new technology that is added to society and that speeds up or amplifies existing human functions.

One such technology that has amplified human functioning profoundly is the mass media, a topic often included in postmodern discourse. Robert Hughes (1993:10), a postmodern writer, discusses the influences of media, especially TV, in America:

... people will do anything, anything at all, in order to get on camera, to be noticed and recorded by television: TV now defines their sense of reality to such an extent that only it can validate their lives and give a short flash of meaning to what they fear may be meaningless.

Hughes (1993:6) gives a specific example of the influence of film and how it can distort perceptions: "Millions of Americans, especially young ones, imagine that the 'truth' about the Kennedy assassination resides in Oliver Stone's vivid lying film *JFK*". The media has become a life defining and reality-producing phenomenon worldwide.

A major 'voice' in postmodernism, concerned with the production of meaning and reality is poststructuralism. Poststructuralism goes against the foundationalist modernist view on truth and how meaning is produced through signs. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1964:180), a prominent anti-foundationalist, argues that "[truth] is a mobile marching army of metaphors, metonymies and anthropomorphisms ... truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions". Nietzsche believes that there are no foundations that can support facts, but only interpretations based on the conventions of society and

thus the West has relied on underpinnings that are fundamentally flawed (Honderich 1995:619).

A contemporary poststructuralist theorist, Jean Baudrillard (1987:13), believes the power of signs and images to be so great that they can produce reality:

It is the reference principle of images which must be doubted, this strategy by means of which they always appear to refer to a real world, to real objects, and to reproduce something which is logically and chronologically, anterior to themselves. None of this is true ... images precede the real to the extent that they invert the causal reality and logical order of the real and its reproductions.

Baudrillard is saying that, more and more, signifiers are being parted from what they signify to such an extent that there is no more 'signified'. He believes the world is in a state where signifiers point only to other signifiers and that there are no truths to be found at a source. He calls this phenomenon 'simulation'.

Another poststructuralist approach is 'deconstruction', a term coined by philosopher Jacques Derrida (1967), which he uses to describe a strategy for exposing all that we take for granted about language, experience and the 'normal' possibilities of human communication. Some of Derrida's best essays seek to dismantle a concept of 'structure' that serves to "immobilise the play of meaning in a text and reduce it to a manageable compass" (Norris 1991:2). Derrida (1967: 24) argues that deconstruction must 'bore from within', or dismantle the texts of philosophy with concepts borrowed from philosophy itself. Deconstruction aims to expose hidden assumptions that humans make whenever interpreting a text (Ward 1997:97). These hidden assumed entities are referred to as a 'metaphysics of presence'.

Postmodern views on identity follow poststructuralist non-foundationalism in that postmodern subjects are not seen as having intrinsic and stable structures that support their identity, but rather are made up of multiplicities, their environments and are always in a state of formation (Sedgwick 2001:137). Postmodernists also question what makes people human, which is central to identity politics (Ward 1997:114). In films such as *Bladerunner* (1982) there are cybernetic organisms, or ‘cyborgs’, that function in exactly the same way that a human would. There is virtually no way of telling a ‘skin job’¹ apart from a human. Ward (1997:114) explains that “we are left questioning the grounds on which we base our assumptions about what makes people human”. Posthumanism is the field of postmodern study that focuses on this aspect of human identity formation, that is, the extent to which technology plays a role in identity formation.

The above are some of the postmodern issues that are addressed in the films *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983), *Powaqqatsi* (1988) and *Naqoyqatsi* (2002), that make up the *Qatsi* trilogy.

1.2 Godfrey Reggio and the Qatsi trilogy

Godfrey Reggio (b. 1940), prominent as a filmmaker, is the inventor of a cinematic style characterised by the absence of conventional filmic elements, such as actors and plot, and also characterised by poetic images and sound of extraordinary impact. Born and raised

¹ The term ‘skin job’ is slang for ‘cybernetic organism’ in the *Bladerunner* film.

in New Orleans, Reggio entered the Christian Brothers, a Roman Catholic pontifical order, at the age of 14. He spent 14 years there in fasting, silence and prayer and, by his own admission, he, in effect, grew up in the Middle Ages (Godfrey Reggio S.a.). This part of his history and background in a monastic order will be discussed in greater depth later in this dissertation.

Among the films Reggio has made is the *Qatsi* trilogy, which includes the films *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983), *Powaqqatsi* (1988) and *Naqoyqatsi* (2002). The word 'qatsi' is taken from Hopi, a Native American language, and means: 'way of life'. Each film in the trilogy has a title which uses this word in conjunction with another word in the Hopi language, resulting in a different meaning in each case. *Koyaanisqatsi* can be interpreted as 'a way of life that calls for another way of living', *Powaqqatsi* means 'a way of life that feeds on others to advance itself' and *Naqoyqatsi* means 'life as war' (Reggio 2002c).

One of the most striking features of these films, which sets them apart from conventional films, is the absence of a script and actors. Instead, the films feature cinematography and music, elements that usually form the background of a film, and bring them into the foreground, thus making the viewer more aware of what he or she perhaps normally takes for granted in the experience of life (Reggio 2002a).

In a short documentary made about the *Qatsi* trilogy, *Essence of life* (2002), Reggio (2002a) explains that the main theme or the main event that these films try to take from

the background and into the foreground, an event that goes mainly unseen, is the transit of peoples lives from a natural environment into a technological order, an artificial environment where it seems that there is no ability to see beyond layer upon layer of this artificiality. He believes people have moved into a world that does not exist in nature but above nature, a world that feeds off nature to keep this alien, artificial world alive. As will be explained in this paper, this alien world is a construct of modernity; a construct Reggio critiques, and thus his approach can be seen as postmodern.

1.3 Research aims

The aim of this study is to analyse the *Qatsi* trilogy using a postmodern framework by investigating how postmodern issues and characteristics are reflected in the films. The postmodern themes that will be investigated include the critique of modern metanarratives, poststructuralism, deconstruction, simulation, identity formation, globalisation, consumer society, spectacle, hyperreality, schizophrenia and postcolonialism.

1.4 Research methods

The research methods will primarily consist of a literature study on postmodernism in order to construct a postmodern framework that is relevant to the *Qatsi* trilogy. This postmodern framework will then be applied to the analysis of the films. This study will present the relevant discourses of postmodern theorists and case studies, including Lyotard's deconstruction of modern metanarratives of science and progress, Foucault's

pluralistic system of knowledge, poststructuralism's anti-foundational approach to the study of the signs and the production of meaning, Baudrillard's discourse on 'simulation' and 'hyperreality', McLuhan's analysis of a cyborged modern society and Jameson's discourse on schizophrenia as a result of pastiche and spectacle. Literature studies will also be done on Western philosophy, film theory and the *Qatsi* trilogy to assist in the analysis of the films.

1.5 Summary of chapters

The second chapter will discuss postmodernism and will look at the postmodern issues relevant to the film medium in general and to the specific postmodern issues dealt with in the *Qatsi* trilogy. The third chapter will analyse the films in the light of this postmodern discourse, and include a historicist analysis, exploring the influence of monasticism on Reggio's worldview and reflected in his films. I will draw my conclusions as to how the *Qatsi* trilogy reflects the postmodern in chapter four.

Chapter 2: Postmodernism

Postmodernism covers a wide range of issues and it is possible to write many volumes on this subject, therefore it is beyond the scope of this study to make a comprehensive investigation. Instead, this paper will attempt to present relevant information on postmodernism in order to discuss the postmodern discourses present in the *Qatsi* trilogy. Only the relevant postmodern themes in the *Qatsi* trilogy will be discussed in this chapter as far as it is possible, but these themes will be contextualised in terms of a broader postmodern framework. This chapter will attempt to provide pertinent information on postmodernism in order to build a framework with which to analyse the *Qatsi* trilogy in chapter three. To introduce the concept of the ‘postmodern’ it is useful to look at the etymology of the word. The following section briefly looks at the various meanings that have been attached to this term as it has emerged from history. Some terms will be presented without explanation at first, but the meaning of these terms will be explained as the study progresses.

2.1 Etymology

Attempts by historians to discover the first use of the term ‘postmodern’ have so far been inconclusive but an early appearance can be found in works by John Watkins, an English portrait photographer, in the 1870s, who used it to describe painting which he saw as more advanced than that of the French Impressionist painters such as Claude Monet and August Renoir (Ward 1997:6). In 1917 the German writer and philosopher Rudolph Panniwitz used the term ‘postmodern’ to describe what he saw as a new phenomenon of

amorality and nihilism (Ward 1997:6), and in 1934 the Spanish writer Federico De Onis used the term to describe a reaction within modernism (Jencks 1986:9). Arnold Toynbee wrote *A study of history* in 1938, which was published after the war in 1947 and used 'postmodern' to refer to a cycle starting in 1875 with the waning of Western dominance (the decline of individualism, capitalism and Christianity) and the rise of non-western cultures, pluralism and a world culture (Jencks 1986:9). Bernard Rosenberg, in his book *Mass culture: the popular arts in America* (1957), used 'Postmodern' to describe the new circumstances of life of that time (Ward 1997:6). In 1965 the Jewish-American literary critic Leslie Fiedler tied it to current radical trends such as post-humanist, post-white, and post-heroic (Jencks 1986:9). The American critic and historian Leo Steinberg, in 1968, noticed in contemporary visual art, such as pop art, a change in interest from representation of nature to flat representation of man-made images and an interest in artificiality as opposed to the search for truth prevalent in earlier movements (Ward 1997:7).

As can be seen from the above, the meanings that have been ascribed to 'postmodern' have been varied and postmodernism remains an amorphous subject that is difficult to define (Spencer 1998:160). The next section will attempt to provide a definition that is broad enough to encompass the scope of postmodernism, but specific enough so as not to lose all meaning.

2.2 Definition

It is hard to give a definition for postmodernism probably because it encompasses such a wide range of issues and because it distances itself from any one truth that someone may try to attach to it (Ward 1995:5). Lyotard (1979:3) believes that the meaning of the term 'postmodern' is unclear because it is used in a wide range of contexts such as literature, art and politics and each context entails its own nuance of meaning. To give an impression of the wide and disjunctive range of issues postmodernism covers, this section will briefly present a number of definitions that have been proposed by various postmodern theorists, before settling on and using as a base, the definition given by Glenn Ward, the author of the book *Postmodernism* (1997).

According to Lloyd Spencer (1998:158) postmodernism can be described as a variant of modernism that has given up the hope of freeing itself from the ravages of modernity.

Iain Grant (1998:29) likens postmodernism to a battlefield after the battle has been fought, strewn with fragments left over from the grand-narratives of modernity. While describing television as a postmodern medium *par excellence*, Marc O'Day (1998:112) uses the terms simulation, hyper-reality, fragmentation, heterogeneity, decentering, intertextuality and pastiche to define postmodernity. In philosophy, Stuart Sim (1998:10) sees postmodernism simply as an updated version of skepticism. Implying that postmodernism is a kind of disease, Clive Owens (1983:57) describes the symptoms of postmodernism as decentered, allegorical and schizophrenic and says that, "it is usually treated as a crisis of cultural authority, specifically of the authority vested in Western European culture and its institutions". Peter Sedgwick (2001:137), applying the

philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri, explains that instead of the postmodern subject being composed out of a fixed core or unities, it is like a rhizome, growing moving and changing with no foundations and only temporary roots. In literature, John Aldridge (1992:158) paints a chaotic picture filled with uncertainty in identity and reality:

In the fiction of [postmodernist writers] ... virtually everything and everyone exists in such a radical state of distortion and aberration that there is no way of determining from which conditions in the real world they have been derived or from what standard of sanity they may be said to depart. The conventions of verisimilitude and sanity have been nullified. Characters inhabit a dimension of structureless being in which their behaviour becomes inexplicably arbitrary and unjudgeable because the fiction itself stands as a metaphor of a derangement that is seemingly without provocation and beyond measurement.

While some theorists try to define postmodernism, others are content to criticise the notion of postmodernism. Christopher Norris (1991:53) argues that “postmodernism is a lazy way of collecting together some of the features of contemporary culture and combining these with partly digested aspects of continental philosophy”. Jurgen Habermas (1983) criticises postmodern thought and criticises Foucault and Lyotard for abandoning the project of modernity, which he believes is a project toward enlightenment.

It is seemingly possible to continue considering the definitions for postmodernism *ad infinitum*. It is therefore necessary to cease investigation at some point and to choose a definition that best fits the purposes of this paper. Thus, this paper turns to Glenn Ward’s definition, which defines the subject of this study aptly.

Largely in Western societies, postmodern discourse proposes that society, culture and lifestyle are today significantly different from what they were a hundred, fifty or even forty years ago. Postmodernism is concerned with subjects such as the developments in mass media, consumer society and information technology. It suggests that these kinds of development have an impact on our understanding of more abstract concepts like meaning, identity and reality. It claims that old styles of analysis are no longer useful, and that new approaches and new vocabularies need to be created in order to understand the present (Ward 1997:5).

Postmodernism can roughly be placed as starting in the 1960s and continuing today (Hart 2004:14). As the prefix 'post' suggests, postmodernism follows modernism, where it perpetuates certain trends, reacts to others and responds to new aspects occurring in present times. Without digressing too much, modernism is the cultural movement that reached its height in the early decades of the twentieth century. A few artists synonymous with modernist cultural output in the visual arts are Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), Henri Matisse (1869-1954) and Jackson Pollock (1912-1956). In modernist architecture, Le Corbusier (1887-1965) and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969) are representative. In literature, James Joyce's (1882-1941) *Ulysses* (1922) is often referenced as a modernist work and in film, Michealangelo Antonioni (1912-2007) is prominent as a modernist film director. The next section will elaborate on modernism when the writings of Clement Greenberg (1909-1994), a well-known modernist art critic, are discussed. Modernism should be distinguished from 'modernity' or the 'Modern Age', which is the larger historical epoch that began after the Middle Ages. There does not seem to be consensus

as to when the Modern Age began but it can be said to have started during the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. The term 'modernity' is related to the broader social and political conditions and views of that time which has since informed much of the modernist movement. These views adhere to a faith in progress, optimism, rationality and the search for absolute knowledge in science and technology, among other aspects (Hart 2004:14; Ward 1997:9-10; Russel 1961:512). To emphasise the distinction between modernism and modernity it is useful to point out that there are many movements within modernism that took an opposing stance towards modernity, for example DADA and Surrealism (Jameson 1991:303).

Similarly, there is a distinction between '*postmodernism*' and '*postmodernity*'. '*Postmodernism*' indicates contemporary 'cultural' output and '*postmodernity*' indicates the current broader 'social' conditions of the age, but the boundary between the cultural and the social has become somewhat blurred and artificial and therefore postmodernism has come to indicate both postmodernity and postmodernism in many texts (Hart 2004:16, Ward 1997:13-14).

Another term that needs clarification is 'modernisation', which refers to the process of becoming modern, of updating social conditions and systems to conform to modern norms very much informed by modern science and implemented with modern technology. According to Jameson (1991:303) modernisation can be linked to industrial progress, rationalisation, reorganisation of production and administration along more efficient lines, electricity, the assembly line, parliamentary democracy, and cheap

newspapers. Modernisation can also be linked to things such as the telecommunications industry, computers, consumerism, modern architecture and transport systems, etcetera. New York and Los Angeles are examples of cities that have undergone comparatively much of this process of modernisation. They epitomise centers of modernisation and can be contrasted to rural medieval or pre-modern villages such as Siena, Italy in the fourteenth century or the 'primitive' collective dwellings found in the Amazon today that have experienced little modernisation (Fremantle 1969:71, BBC Knowledge 2009). Modernisation is a never-ending process of updating and improvement that continues today. However, whether or not modernisation actually results in improved conditions for humans, or even other living creatures, is debatable and is often critiqued in postmodern texts.

Modernity can be seen as the dominant movement today in that it achieved a victory over the discourse of the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages, and that we have come to live in a mostly 'modern' world today. But Foster (1983:ix) describes this victory as a pyrrhic one, meaning it was a victory achieved at a staggering cost, and Habermas (1983:6) argues that although modernity is dominant, it is dead. What he means by this is that modernity, through science and technology, strives toward the infinite progress of knowledge and the improvement of society, but the twentieth century has shattered this optimism and many critics agree that the project of modernity is now deeply problematic. One such critic is the postcolonialist Frantz Fanon (2000:23), who states:

[Modernists] have not carried out in practice the mission which befell them, which consisted of bringing their whole weight to bear violently upon these [non-modern] elements, of modifying their arrangement and their nature, of changing them and, finally of bringing the problem of mankind to an infinitely higher plane.

Thus, from Fanon's point of view, history proves that the modernisation of the world has been a violent and destructive exercise that has been imposed to the detriment of the affected societies.

Now that this section has established a general definition for postmodernism and clarified some important terms, the following section will focus more specifically on the aspects highlighted in Ward's definition, namely the postmodern analyses of meaning, reality and identity. The next section investigates the postmodern views on meaning by looking at postmodernism's tendency away from simplistic, overarching theories of the world to more complex, heterogeneous, plural views and what effect these have on meaning.

2.3 From grand narratives to pluralism

Modernist thought tends to believe in fixed truths and facts, or stable foundations, with which to build sets of rules with authority and certainty by which everyone can live, known as grand narratives or metanarratives. Marshal McLuhan (1964:5) states in his book, *Understanding media*, that previously, in the Modern Age, cultures had their favorite model of perception and knowledge that was prescribed to everybody. A mark of our age is a revulsion against such imposed patterns.

To understand the tendency to create grand narratives it is useful to look at the writings of Clement Greenberg, a prominent modernist American critic, who was very dogmatic indeed. In his article, *Avant-garde and kitsch*, published in the *Partisan Review* in 1939,

he explains his view on what kind of work should be called art and what kind of work should not. He creates two categories namely, avant-garde, which he regards as art, and everything else, which he labels kitsch. Greenberg (1939:6) states: “One and the same civilisation produces simultaneously two such different things as a poem by T.S. Eliot and a Tin Pan Alley song, or a painting by Braque and a *Saturday evening post* cover”. In both phrases the former item is avant-garde and the latter item is kitsch. His affinity for the avant-garde is clear in a quote where he likens the exploits of an avant-garde artist or poet to God: “The avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms” (Greenberg 1939:8). On the other hand his contempt for kitsch can be seen in this quote where he explains how kitsch is a watered down version of originality or the new: “... when enough time has elapsed the new is looted for new ‘twists’ which are then watered down and served up as kitsch” (Greenberg 1939:11).² This article is an example of a modernist view, which in broad strokes and with much authority and certainty arranges cultural output into high and low art with a claim to the ultimate truth in terms of what is good art and what kind of art everyone should have. It has an overarching quality and can be seen as an example of a grand narrative that gives meaning to, or legitimates, certain things as art.

In his book, *The postmodern condition: a report on knowledge*, Lyotard tackles a grand narrative that has had a massive influence on the West, namely science. Lyotard (1979:7-11) states that scientific knowledge does not represent all knowledge, but that in fact it

² Greenberg was influenced by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1995:290) who demanded in the ‘*Analytic of the beautiful*’ that taste, or the judgment of beauty, was derived universally from grounds deep-seated and shared alike by all men.

has always existed in addition to and in conflict with what he calls narrative knowledge. Briefly, narrative knowledge is all knowledge that is not accepted as scientific such as myth, fiction, philosophy, theology and so forth. Each kind of knowledge is subject to its own set of rules that legitimate it, or applying Wittgenstein's (1889-1951) theory, belongs to its own language game. Lyotard (1979:26-29, 40) argues that scientific knowledge, which holds itself to be superior to narrative knowledge, is in fact no more or less necessary than narrative knowledge. This is because scientific knowledge can be thought of as just one language game among many others and has no claim to be a legitimating language of the other. Furthermore, scientific knowledge lacks the ability to legitimate itself because it is in fact based on and relies on narrative knowledge for its validity. Therefore, science cannot be seen to have authority over narrative knowledge and its status as a legitimising grand narrative is questioned.

Lyotard (1979:xxiv,11,46) also believes that the economic, political and technological system of which science and modernity are the progenitors, is not suitable for human beings because this system's interests do not coincide with human interests, but rather, similarly to a computer, revolve around the optimisation of input and output on a global scale in order to increase its power, or in other words, 'performativity'. This results in goals of truth and justice being subjugated to obtaining more power and force. Lyotard (1979:53-60) points out further problems with science in approaches like chaos theory, quantum theory, microphysics, fractals, probability theory, catastrophe theory etcetera, which have highlighted uncertainty in measurement. As a result of these theories it is more difficult to view science as rational discipline dealing with a stable reality and

science's contribution to ecological disaster, and the development of nuclear and chemical weapons, has made it difficult to associate scientific practice with 'progress' (Ward 1997:172). Similarly, Frampton (1983:18) argues that modernisation, which is driven by science and technology, can no longer be seen as a liberative movement because its trajectory has brought humanity to the brink of nuclear war and the annihilation of the species and adds that the domination of the mass media over society indicates enslavement, not progress.

In lieu of the destabilisation of these and other grand narratives that were once thought to be so dependable, postmodern society has lost faith in, or showed an incredulity towards them (Lyotard 1979:xxiv). Similarly, Charles Jencks (1986:50) states, "those who have written on postmodernism have noted the 'loss of authority' which seems so characteristic of our age". Owens (1983:58) notes that postmodern art not only denies the authority and universality of modernism's metanarratives, but actively seeks to undermine them; hence its generally deconstructive thrust.

Grand narratives provide an important function in that they have a unifying and centering effect on thought and society. According to Jack Solomon (1998:39), grand narratives arrange the general flow of experience in terms of a universal framework that gives meaning to, or makes sense out of people's lives. For example, the Bible provided the West with a narrative that has framed human existence between a creative origin and an apocalyptic end. It is written by a divine author and gives purpose to the seemingly chaotic and random events that occur one after another in people's life experiences. Thus,

because of the lack of faith in grand narratives, postmodern society is ‘decentered’ in that instead of there being a single, monolithic, overarching, grand narrative there are now many little narratives, offering a multiplicity of thought and worldviews to explain the world. Furthermore, even though these different narratives may conflict with one another, in postmodernism, all can be held as valid or ‘true’ and there is a reluctance to give one narrative a privileged status over others.

In his book, *The archaeology of knowledge*, Michel Foucault (1995) develops an alternative, pluralistic theory to the conventional, linear account of knowledge. His theory revolves around discourse or discursive practices. Simply put, discursive practices consist of discursive formations, which are statements that coalesce to form disciplines such as medicine, science and religion. Each discursive practice has its own set of laws that makes it possible to emerge out of other discursive formations, all underpinned by configurations of historical, social and cultural power. Foucault aimed to develop a theory that would demonstrate the pluralistic and complex nature of knowledge. Conflicting formations can cut across one another and inform each other without giving privilege to any one formation. Instead of trying to ‘discover’ the privileging essential hidden meaning of what is not said in a statement, he tries to ‘locate’ meaning in the network of nodes of statements and laws of their dispersion. Foucault (1995:205) states:

[This discursive theory] is trying to deploy a dispersion that can never be reduced to a single system of differences, a scattering that is not related to absolute axes of reference; it is trying to operate a decentering that leaves no privilege to any center. The role of such a discourse is not to dissipate oblivion, to rediscover, in the depths of things said, at the very place in which they are silent, the moment of their birth (whether this is seen as their empirical creation, or the transcendental act that gives them origin); it does not set out to be a recollection of the original or a memory of truth. On the contrary, its task is to *make* differences: to constitute them as objects, to analyse them, and to define their concept.

Foucault (1995:129-131) argues that the archive, or the body of material writing that is available to us, forms the given, or the 'a priori', with which knowledge can be created. This archive, he says, is not a solid amorphous mass but rather like a field of stars, a dispersion in which little has been said compared to what can be said, thus there are many gaps, discontinuities and ruptures in history, instead of an initial point of a system of axioms and truths from which all other knowledge and history necessarily unfolds in a smooth, continuous and linear progression. And, just as some stars seem clear and nearby, but in fact are far away and have become supernova, so too some knowledge which seems clear to us now may be on the verge of disappearing or becoming deligitimated. Thus, discursive formations and the statements within them are not set in stone, but rather emerge with a status, are subjected to and bound up within other networks and formations, which either maintain or efface that status (Foucault 1995:104-105). History emerges in fragments and multiplicities, some discourses survive while others do not and 'archaeology' is the term Foucault uses for the searches through this archive.

Thus, in postmodernism there is a tendency away from grand narratives based on supposedly stable foundations and a move towards smaller, more plural and more complex ways of thinking about things like knowledge, history, art, society, identity and truth; ways of thinking that do not prescribe one overarching set of rules for everyone but rather a 'pluralism' that tries to accommodate difference.

Postmodern artists reflect this pluralism by combining different styles into one work, known as pastiche. In architecture, Jencks (1986:14) defines postmodernism as a "... double coding: the combination of modern techniques with something else (usually traditional building) in order for architecture to communicate with the public and a concerned minority, usually other architects". The New York *AT&T* building (1978-82), by architects Philip Johnson and John Burgee, is an example of such pastiche in that it contains references to more than one style: a modernist skyscraper, an Italian Renaissance chapel, Chippendale furniture, and the radiator of a Rolls Royce (Ward 1997:22). By including references to many styles, a work becomes what Jencks refers to as, 'multivalent', which means the work has more than one meaning or the work can be interpreted in more than one way.^{3 4} Thus, in postmodernism, the meaning of something does not necessarily have to be singular and fixed, but rather there is space for different interpretations, not only just from person to person but also from reading to reading of a text (Spivak 1997:xii). However, postmodernism does not claim that something can take on 'any' meaning, as this would result in a state of everything becoming meaningless and thus devolve into a state of absolute relativism (Derrida 1967; Foster 1983). Habermas (1983:10-11) points to the failure of the Surrealist experiment, which was to blow up the sphere of art and force a reconciliation of art and life in a way that implied 'anything

³ Frampton (1983:17) argues that this strategy is just a form of social control and a 'compensatory facade' to cover up the harsh realities of modernism's universalistic system. He says that modern building is now so universally conditioned by optimised technology that the possibility of creating significant urban form has become extremely limited. He describes the modern city, with its freestanding high rises and its serpentine freeways as 'megalopolitan' development, which declares the victory of universal civilisation over locally inflected culture.

⁴ The composer of the music in the *Qatsi* trilogy, Philip Glass, uses a similar strategy, described by Jameson (1982:111) as the synthesis of classical and popular styles.

goes'. But, as Habermas (1983:11) points out, "nothing remains from a desublimated meaning or a destructured form; an emancipatory effect does not follow".

In film, a nonnarrative structure reflects a plural, or decentered, approach by distancing itself from the conventional, centered narrative. The conventional, or classic narrative, as analysed by Aristotle (1995:494-500) in *Poetics*, has a beginning, where the events are initiated, a middle, involving a complication of some sort and an end, where the complication is resolved. It follows a linear timeline, the events and characters are related to each other through a plot and the events are made to seem rational and necessary.

Audiences find such plots easy to comprehend. The narrative/nonnarrative boundary in film is a difficult one, but the general characteristic of a nonnarrative film is the absence of these conventional narrative elements, such as plot, characters and events unfolding in a necessary, rational and linear way (Aumont et al 1992:70-72). Some films are more nonnarrative than others depending on how far they deviate from mimesis and the conventional, commercial film narrative structure. As with grand narratives, the conventional film narrative has a centering function in that it organises events within a framework that makes sense and gives meaning to the film (Solomon 1998:39). The deviation of nonnarrative films from the classic narrative results in a decenteredness and a viewing experience that is often coded as disturbing and traumatic. This decentered nature of nonnarrative films means that they are complex and confusing because they break the chronological order of events, disrupt the one-dimensionality of time and destabilise the normal unified experience of space and reality (Buckland 2009:2-3).

Furthermore, the forking paths that the plots follow do not unfold necessarily and often

the complications are not resolved. For example, *Pulp fiction* (1994) presents its scenes out of chronological order, *Lost highway* (1997) disrupts space and time by having a man appear simultaneously in two different places (in a phone booth and in front of the woman he is talking to over the phone) and *Mulholland drive* (2001) never resolves the significance of a mysterious blue box that features throughout the film. It can be said that the nonnarrative film experience reflects the postmodern experience in that contemporary life can also seem narrativeless (i.e. decentered, confusing, complex and without meaning). Just as the nonnarrative film experience is often coded as traumatic and disturbing, so too the postmodern experience, dominated by new media, is becoming more ambiguous, fragmented and schizophrenic. The postmodern experience as it is influenced by the mass media and commodification will be discussed in more detail later. For now it is enough to note that, in this way, nonnarrative films can be regarded as postmodern.

This section has established a progression in postmodernism from the grand narratives of the past to a more pluralistic approach to interpretation and meaning. The study of how interpretation operates and how meaning and reality are produced is the subject of a major ‘voice’ within postmodernism, namely poststructuralism. It is to this topic that the next section turns.

2.4 Production of meaning and reality

As will be seen, poststructuralism is closely related to grand narratives and pluralism discussed in the previous section. In fact, Lyotard and Foucault are both considered to be

poststructuralists. Poststructuralism is a continuation and modification of structuralism, and since both movements have influenced postmodern thought, it is necessary to discuss structuralism first. Structuralism is a set of theories developed by, among others, Claude Lévi Strauss (1908-2009), who is seen as the father figure of the movement, especially in the social sciences. He drew deeply from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and Roman Jakobson (1896-1982). Since Saussure is often credited as the founder of structuralism (and modern linguistics) this section will discuss his theories as an introduction to this movement.

In his *Course in general linguistics*, first published posthumously in 1915, Saussure (1960) attempted to establish the underlying structure of how languages work in producing concepts or meaning. Saussure (1960:65) argued that the basic component of language is a sign and that a sign is made up of two components namely a signifier and a signified. The signifier is the sound the word makes or the letters on the page. The signified is the concept or the mental image to which the signifier gives rise. What makes Saussure's theories interesting to postmodernists is that, according to him, the relationship between the signified and the signifier is not natural, but only based on social consensus or conventions (Saussure 1960:67). In other words, the relationship between the word and the thing is arbitrary. Thus, he questions the traditional, or common sense notion that there is a necessary or fundamental link between the word and the thing. Also, signs do not have value in a positive or intrinsic way, but only have value in relation to the other signs in the system, often by what is regarded as their opposites. Saussure (1960:117-118) states:

Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others It is understood that ... concepts are purely differential and defined not by positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is in being what others are not.... Signs function, then, not through their intrinsic value but through their relative position.

Thus, a sign's 'truer' meaning is not determined by what it is, but rather by what it is not. In this way structuralism can be seen as anti-foundational in that it denies that meaning is based on values that are natural or intrinsic to objects, but rather that meaning is created by social convention, which is itself not stable, but changes as time goes by. However, structuralism does claim that there is a deep and hidden underlying structure to meaning that can be researched, and general and universal laws to which all historical phenomena can be reduced. Christopher Norris (1991:3), the author of *Deconstruction: theory and practice*, states: "Structuralism at its most conservative, is an outlook that lends support to traditional ideas of the text as a bearer of stable (if complicated) meanings and the critic as faithful seeker after the truth in the text". Thus, while Saussure does go some way to destabilise traditional foundations, he still adheres to the claim that absolute truth can be found in the underlying structure of language ('langue'), which he considers to be a self-contained whole and belong to a natural order.

It is this aspect that poststructuralism problematises. Poststructuralism differs from structuralism in that poststructuralism is more anti-foundational as it rejects any claim that alleges to have a hold on fixed and stable truths. As noted in the previous section, Lyotard (1979) is ultimately against all metanarratives, which are foundational in that they are built on structures that claim to be stable. Foucault (1995) too rejects the notion

of fixed foundations and develops a system of discourse based on changing and unstable laws. When discussing anti-foundationalism, one of the primary philosophers to consider is Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) who is considered to have had a substantial influence on postmodern thought in this area. Nietzsche (1964), as well as many postmodernist theorists, such as Lyotard, Foucault and Derrida, argues that the history of Western philosophy has been one attempt after another to establish secure grounds upon which knowledge can be based. For example, René Descartes (1596-1650), considered by many to be the founder of modern philosophy, thought his secure grounds existed in the fact that he was thinking, famously stating: “I think therefore I am” (*cogito ergo sum*), and in God, an absolute being that could support our knowledge of the world (Russel 1961:547). But Nietzsche (1964:180) believes that there are no facts or truths to be found, only errors or interpretations based on our conventions. He states:

What therefore is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms: in short a sum of human relations which became poetically and rhetorically intensified, metamorphosed, adorned, and after long usage seem to a nation fixed, canonic and binding; truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions; worn-out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the senses; coins which have their obverse effaced and now are no longer of account as coins but merely metal.

In *The joyful wisdom* (1882) (also translated as *The gay science*), Nietzsche (1964:76,153-155) explains that certain conventions are put in place for the survival of the human species, often tyrannically imposed upon people, which through long usage and passed down through the ages become regarded as standards of knowledge, moral and truthful. Thus, our knowledge is not based on eternal foundations, but on conventions that change over time. Nietzsche, like Lyotard, criticises the belief that modern science

can lead us to knowledge and truth, based as it is upon our sensory perception, logic and ideas of cause and effect. Nietzsche (1964:158) states:

... in fact there is a continuum before us, from which we isolate a few portions; - just as we always observe a motion as isolated points, and therefore do not properly see it, but infer it. The abruptness with which many effects takes place leads us into error; it is however only an abruptness for us. There is an infinite multitude of processes in that abrupt moment which escape us. An intellect which could see the flux of events not according to our mode of perception, as things arbitrarily separated and broken - would throw aside the conception of cause and effect.

An important anti-foundational theme in Nietzsche's work is the decline in the belief in God, which is an important foundation in the history of Western civilisation, as science takes predominance over the authoritative discourse of Christianity of the Middle Ages. Hence Nietzsche's (1964:151,275) famous statement: "God is dead!". Here Nietzsche is denying the existence of an absolute being upon which all knowledge can be based, and therefore he also denies a grand metaphysical substructure that supports our knowledge of the world. Thus, Nietzsche believes that the underpinnings of Western civilisation are fundamentally flawed.

In poststructuralism, 'deconstruction' is a discourse that develops an anti-foundational philosophy. Coined by Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), deconstruction describes a strategy for exposing all that we take for granted about language, experience and the 'normal' possibilities of human communication. Some of Derrida's seminal essays seek to dismantle the concept of structure that serves to immobilise the play of meaning in a text and reduce it to a manageable compass (Norris 1991:2). Deconstruction attempts to expose hidden assumptions that humans make whenever interpreting a text. These hidden assumed entities constitute the 'metaphysics of presence' (Derrida 1967:102).

In *Of grammatology*, Derrida (1967) argues that the most basic unit of meaning is the 'gram' as opposed to the signifier-signified model. In a text grams form threads of meaning, which Derrida (1967:23) calls 'trace' or 'différance'. The connections between the grams are changing all the time in the fabric or weave of the trace. Thus, meaning is not fixed in a text and it is always deferred (Derrida 1967:65). Derrida (1967:13,37,49-50, 115) also undermines the notions of a stable structure, self-presence, the thing-in-itself, the transcendental signified, *a priori* or God. These terms have been used in the tradition of Western philosophy to mean concepts that transcend all signifiers and provide a stable point of reference, such as truth, logic and reason (Kenny 1994:120,166,181). Derrida argues that all these things are no different from and function like ordinary signifiers. Thus, without the transcendental signified, there is no signified and we are left only with signifiers, or with what he calls, 'trace' or 'différance' (Derrida 1967:50). Deconstructive writing traces the surface of a text looking for flaws or faults – the opening of joints or articulations where the text might be dismembered and so expose the flaws of Western thought and philosophy (Derrida 1967:57,65).

However, Derrida also stresses that we cannot dispense with these flawed notions because it is all we understand. Thus, deconstruction is forced to 'bore from within', or work to take apart the texts of philosophy with notions borrowed from philosophy itself (Derrida 1967:24). Derrida (1967:13) argues: "Of course, it is not a question of rejecting these notions; they are necessary and at least at present, nothing is conceivable without them." Thus, we are limited by a metaphysical enclosure, or patterns of thought, and we

cannot produce concepts outside this enclosure until it has been removed (Derrida 1967:99). This is the task of deconstruction. Furthermore, although he says the possibilities of play in a text are limitless in this system of 'différance', anything cannot mean anything. Derrida (1967:46) notes that trace is, "unmotivated but not capricious. Différance permits a *certain* liberty among full terms."

An example of one of Derrida's (1967) deconstructive readings is his analysis of the traditional view on speech and writing. According to Plato, De Saussure, Rousseau and Levi-Strauss, writing is considered to be the original agency of corruption of meaning, and speech was favoured as the carrier of truth. According to Plato (in Norris 1991:63),

writing is the dangerous 'supplement' which lures language away from its authentic origins in speech and self-presence. To commit one's thoughts to writing is to yield them up to the public domain, to risk being misconstrued by all the promiscuous wiles of interpretation. Writing is the 'death' that lies in wait for the 'living' thought, the subtle agent of corruption whose workings infect the very sources of truth.

Reacting to this, Derrida argues that writing is not just graphical in form. It extends further. Writing is not separate from speech. Writing is always present within the text, hence the famous statement: 'there is nothing outside the text'. Traditionally, in Western philosophy, writing was seen as reflecting language and language was seen as reflecting thought, but Derrida argues that all these entities create each other in a complex relationship (Derrida 1967:56; Norris 1991:30). Derrida (1967:57-60) calls this broader concept of writing 'arche-writing'.

A concept that is closely related to deconstruction and the production of meaning and reality is 'defamiliarisation', a term first coined by the Russian formalist Victor

Shklovsky. In his essay *Art as technique* (1917), Shklovsky (1998:17-20) argues that familiarity causes our perception of things to become ‘unconsciously automatic’. This means we do not perceive an object in its ‘entirety’ but only ‘partially’, or as he puts it, “we only see its silhouette as though it were enveloped in a sack”. Shklovsky believes that art exists to help us recover our complete perception of things:

[A]rt exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists that one may feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of the arts is to make objects “unfamiliar”, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception.

Defamiliarisation is achieved by employing various devices such as taking something out of its usual context or by treating familiar dogmas and ritual as though they were unfamiliar. Various passages written by Leo Tolstoy are cited as examples of defamiliarisation, one of which is a passage where the opera is described without ever using the word ‘opera’ or naming the event as an ‘opera’, thereby describing the event as if it were something seen for the first time (Shklovsky 1998:20).

Defamiliarisation often appears in postmodern texts because of its ability to break familiar patterns of thought and hence to be deconstructive. In the translator’s preface to *Of grammatology* (1967), Gayatri Spivak (1997:xiii, xviii) points out that questioning the familiar is one of Derrida’s main concerns:

A certain view of the world, of consciousness, and of language has been accepted as the correct one, and, if the minute particulars of that view are examined, a rather different picture ... emerges. The examination involves an enquiry into the operation of our most *familiar* gestures ... Derrida, then, is asking us to change certain *habits* of mind ...

Thus, defamiliarisation can be seen to have a deconstructive nature as it re-inscribes the familiar with the unfamiliar, causing one to re-see certain things that may otherwise have gone unnoticed and perhaps resulting in changed or more comprehensive perceptions. However, postmodernism differs from defamiliarisation in that it would not claim to restore a complete or original perception, as this would be a foundational trait (Crawford 1984:209-219).

In regards to film, devices such as time-lapse, slow-motion and the close-up are used to effect defamiliarisation. Walter Benjamin (2004:805-806) points out that a different nature speaks to the camera than opens up to the naked eye. When filmic devices such as slow-motion and the close-up are used, the familiar is re-inscribed with the unfamiliar and completely new structures are seen. Film can isolate things that normally go unnoticed in the general stream of perception, and thus film has brought about a deepening of our optical and acoustic perception. Benjamin (2004: 806) states:

By the close-ups of the things around us, by the focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, ... extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives Our taverns and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up beyond hope. Then came film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris we calmly and adventurously go traveling.

Christina Degli-Eposti (1998:5-7) in her introduction to *Postmodernism in the cinema*, also acknowledges this trend in postmodern film. She states that new communicational relationships are constructed by the director between the spectator and the screen in ways that 'estrangle' (or 'defamiliarise') the spectator. These new relationships result not only in the spectator seeing differently: he/she is also aware of seeing himself/herself see. For

example, the effects of slow-motion emphasise and expand segmented and reconstructed perceptions of real time, which are given excessive, hyperbolic visibility through deconstruction.

Another poststructuralist highlighting further problems with the foundational aspect of structuralism is Roland Barthes (1925-1980) who foregrounds the difficulty of using language to analyse language. Barthes (1967:93) argues that someone who studies a text may seem to have an objective point of view, but in fact, he or she is inextricably intertwined within his or her own dominant culture, thus clouding, concealing and limiting the reader's ability to decipher the text. Barthes undermines the notion that semiology, the structuralist study of how signs work in society, is a meta-linguistic method that can separate its own operations from the language it is working upon (Norris 1991:9).

As discussed above, Saussure (1960:117-118) argues that the meaning of a sign is never its own special property but is the product of its difference from other signs. Similarly, according to Foucault (1995:23),

the frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first line and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration ... it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences ... the book is not simply the object that one holds in one's hand ... its unity is variable and relative.

Similarly, Barthes (1995:389) states, "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination." These statements point to another important aspect in the production of meaning in a text, termed 'intertextuality', by the poststructuralist theorist Julia Kristeva

(1980). Intertextuality describes the way people use texts outside the current text to interpret and produce meaning. An example of this is a television advertisement which assumes that the audience has a wide knowledge of popular culture, and plays on this knowledge by producing a whole range of quotes, in-jokes, parodies, pastiches, and imitations of Hollywood movies, television programmes and other advertisements. ‘Spoof’ films such as *Hot shots* (1991), or *Spy hard* (1996) are intertextual because they reference other films, namely, *Rambo* (1982), *Pulp fiction* (1994), *Die hard* (1988) and *Apocalypse now* (1979) (Ward 1997:163). Thus, we see that meaning is not contained positively in a text by itself but has meaning because of its relation to other texts.

The discussion so far has shown that signs play an important role in perception and thus in the forming of our realities. According to Peter Wollen (1986:168), a postmodern theorist, our environment is becoming increasingly dominated by signs, rather than by natural objects or events, and these signs are becoming our primary reality. Wollen (1986:168) notes that storage technology such as photography, audio and video tape, computer hard-drives and other devices, have made it possible to ‘self-reference’ to such a degree that no ‘original’ is needed. An example of this is the genre of music video where an editor needs only a database of previously recorded footage to compile and create a new music video. Wollen believes that postmodern cultural production is increasingly following this trend. Music videos and films like *Blue velvet* (1986), *Pulp fiction* (1994) and *True romance* (1993) are presented in cinematic quotation marks and are not presented as a true reflection of reality to validate their existence (Ward 1997:70).

Frederic Jameson (1982:118) argues that in postmodern cinematography all that matters is the effect, or ‘intensity’ of the image as opposed to the meaning of the image.

Similarly, Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007), a well-known theorist on postmodernism, believes, anti-foundationally, that the power of the sign or the image is so great that it inverts the common sense notion that the image refers to something that precedes it. Instead, he argues that the image comes before the thing, and in this way the image does not reflect ‘reality’, but produces it. In *The evil demon of images*, Baudrillard (1987:13) states:

It is the reference principle of images which must be doubted, this strategy by means of which they always appear to refer to a real world, to real objects, and to reproduce something which is logically and chronologically, anterior to themselves. None of this is true ... images precede the real to the extent that they invert the causal reality and logical order of the real and its reproductions.

Another quote from Baudrillard’s (1986:56) book, *America*, might be helpful to illustrate an aspect of this inversion:

The American city seems to have stepped right out of the movies. To grasp its secrets, you should not, then, begin with the city and move inwards to the screen; you should begin with the screen and move outwards towards the city It is the same feeling you get when you step out of an Italian or Dutch gallery into a city that seems the very reflection of the paintings you have just seen, as if the city had come out of the paintings and not the other way about.

Nietzsche (1964:96) argues similarly that the conventions or perceptions of a society precede the real:

Unspeakably more depends on what things are called, than on what they actually are. The reputation, the name and appearance, the importance, the usual measure and weight of things – each being in origin most frequently an error and arbitrariness thrown over the thing like a garment, and quite alien to their essence and even to their exterior – have

gradually, by the belief therein and its continuous growth from generation to generation, grown as it were on-and-onto things and become their very body; the appearance at the very beginning becomes almost always the essence in the end, and *operates* as the essence. What a fool he would be who would think it enough to refer here to this origin and this nebulous veil of illusions, in order to annihilate that which virtually passes for the world – namely, so-called “reality”! It is only as creators that we can annihilate! – valuations and probabilities, in order in the long run to create new “things”.

In his book, *Simulations*, Baudrillard (1983) points out that more and more, signifiers are being parted from what they signify to such an extent that there is no more signified. The postmodern world is in a state where signifiers point only to other signifiers, endlessly, with no possibility of finding a ‘truth’ at a ‘source’. This phenomenon is called ‘simulation’. This world of free-floating signifiers generate a reality that is realer than real, an excess of reality that generates a state of ‘hyperreality’. In this hyperreal state, the real is exterminated and things become, as Baudrillard (1987:444; 2000:61-68,81) describes, obscene in that they move beyond their own reason for existing, and thus enter a paradoxical state. An obvious example of this is Japanese ‘quadrophonics’, where one is able to listen to music in, what is claimed to be, four dimensions, by connecting to a technological apparatus. Baudrillard (1979:29-31) describes this as obscene because music was never meant to be heard in that way, it is an excess of music or a hyperreal form of the music experience. Although ‘quadrophonics’ claims to be able to deliver music in a more real way than ever before, it creators have, Baudrillard argues, “confused the real with the greatest number of dimensions possible. No one knows where the real begins or ends, nor understands, therefore, the fever of perfectibility that persists in the real’s reproduction. The real becomes a vertiginous phantasy of exactitude lost in the infinitesimal.” In this example we see how excessiveness annihilates the ‘real’ and generates a ‘hyperreal’ experience that goes beyond its own reason for existing.

Baudrillard has much to say about the effects of simulation and hyperreality on the individual and on society, some of which will be discussed in the next section.

Now that some groundwork has been laid for the postmodern approach to meaning and reality, the following section will explore the next part of the definition for postmodernism given in this paper, namely the postmodern view on identity. Just as meaning and reality are thought of as mutable in poststructuralism, identity in postmodern terms is not thought of as fixed, but as always in a state of flux.

2.5 Identity

Identity deals with the way people look at themselves and asks questions such as, what makes us human? What is the nature of our existence? What is our purpose, if we have one at all? How do we relate to others? Postmodernism is especially interested in contemporary influences on our identities, such as modern technology, mass media and the commodification of society.

The postmodern view on identity follows the anti-foundational view of poststructuralism. Sedgwick (2001:137), applying the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, compares the postmodern subject to a rhizome, which instead of being a makeup of unities, is rather a makeup of multiplicities. He explains that the subject is like a rhizome, growing, moving and changing with no foundations and only temporary roots. The subject is an intersection of disparate things or events (tubers), which forms an assemblage or a multiplicity made up of heterogeneous forces, also called a 'becoming'. The rhizome has

no beginning or end, but is always the 'middle' and it is always in a state of growth. An example of this, is when a man and a horse intersect. The result is not a man and a horse alone, but rather, it is a man-animal symbiosis, something that has changed into, for example, an assemblage of war. Thus, our identities are inextricably entangled within our environment and culture where they are formed by a multiplicity of heterogeneous forces and not by any intrinsic, stable structure.

In light of the above, the intersection of people and a technological environment would have profound consequences on identity in that technology can no longer be seen as a tool that can be wielded autonomously by humans, but rather must be seen as something that has become so ubiquitous and integrated into human existence that we can no longer separate ourselves from it; it has become part of us. McLuhan (1964:8) points out that with every new technology or, in his terms, 'medium', existing human function is amplified which makes us more powerful. An example of this would be the invention of the automobile. It did not introduce movement into our society, but it did amplify movement, making it possible to travel much greater distances. This ability to travel further makes us more powerful or can be seen to extend our abilities. Another example given by Benjamin (2004:792) explains how technology has amplified the reproduction of the image, which has been developed from the founding and stamping of coins in ancient Greece to photography in the nineteenth century and then to film in the twentieth century. McLuhan, with Fiore, in *The medium is message* (1967) takes this further by saying that technology can be seen to extend 'us' conceptually, or become part of us. McLuhan and Fiore (1967:31-40) note, "The wheel ... is an extension of the foot ... the

book is an extension of the eye ... clothing, an extension of the skin ... electronic circuitry, an extension of the central nervous system". Similarly, a cyborg is a functional or hypothetical person whose abilities are extended beyond natural human function by technology integrated into the body (*Concise Oxford English dictionary* 2007:288). Thus it is clear that what McLuhan suggests is that technology is more than just a tool that people use - it has influenced society more profoundly than that: now it is possible to see contemporary society as 'cyborged', which has led to a profound change in human identity.

As technology extends human awareness, cultures on opposite sides of the globe becoming aware of each other and affecting each other becomes a possibility.

Globalisation is a term used to describe the process whereby different cultures around the world become integrated via economic, political, technological and cultural factors.

McLuhan refers to this process in postmodern times in his concept of the 'global village'.

What he means by this is that as technology (through television, radio, newspapers, films and telecommunications systems) extends our awareness or, according to McLuhan (1964:3-4), our central nervous systems, in a global embrace, the entire world contracts, conceptually, into a small village. Thus, integration between cultures is amplified by technology and this has led to a heightened state of awareness and an age of anxiety.

In his book, *Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism* (1991), Frederic Jameson (b.1934) argues that postmodernism is (among other things) an advanced stage of globalised or multinational capitalism. Jameson (1991:35-36) states that capitalism has

progressed in three stages since the eighteenth century, namely 'market capitalism' (based on industrial development), 'monopoly capitalism' (depending on growth via the creation of foreign markets and colonisation) and 'multinational capitalism', which he associates with the terms 'consumer', 'spectacle' or 'image' society, the media, the world system and postmodernism. In this globalised stage the world is linked via immense telecommunication systems and media webs spanning continents, corporations burst their national boundaries and spread out across the globe becoming more powerful than individual nation states, the entire globe comes under the influence of this new system and the seemingly unstoppable process of modernisation. Jameson (1991:xx) states:

... something has changed, ... we have gone through a transformation of the life world, which is somehow decisive but incomparable with the older convulsions of modernisation and industrialisation, less perceptible and dramatic, somehow, but more permanent, precisely because it is more thoroughgoing and all pervasive.

According to Jameson, the effects of this globalisation on the individual are profound in that there is presently no representation for the global level, no way for an individual to conceptualise their location within the decentered global networks because it goes beyond any individual's natural ability to do so. Thus, this results in an existential dilemma and a disorientation within the experience of postmodern time and space. Jameson (1991:413) states: "[T]he individual subject has been inserted into a set of radically discontinuous realities, frames that range from the surviving space of bourgeois private life to the unimaginable decentering of global capital itself." Thus, the postmodern subject can be seen as fragmented, decentered, dispersed and disoriented within his/her environment. On a social level, an important point to highlight in Jameson's account of postmodernism is that where postmodernism engages in pastiche, pluralism,

heterogeneity and diversity, it simultaneously advances a global modernisation, which homogenises everything under a single capitalistic world system (Ward 1997:191).

The factors contributing to the disorienting nature of the postmodern experience of time and space are diverse. In film, Hughes (1993:6) highlights the way the film *JFK* (1991) has distorted the reality of the events that occurred in the assassination of the American president J. F. Kennedy for millions of Americans, especially the youth. Hughes (1993:10) points out that television has become so important to some people in terms of defining their realities and giving meaning to their lives, that they will go to any lengths to be on television. Thus, in the mass media, especially in advertising, the constant torrents of images and signs that surround people have a profound effect on their realities and thus their identities. In his book, *Society of the spectacle* (1967), Guy Debord (1983) maintains that where modern conditions prevail, through the mass media and commodification, the social relations among people are mediated by images, or the 'spectacle', and thus form a dominant phenomenon in society. The accumulation of spectacle results in a separation from primary human, or natural forms of life because the spectacle, in a process over time becomes all that can be seen (Debord 1983:42). Debord (1983:39) sees commodities as spectacle, where they are fetishised, or imbued with religious value. In industrially advanced areas, commodities have a tendency to invade the social space, superimposing themselves in 'geological layers' and become the dominant occupation of social life, beyond which none can see (Debord 1983:42). Even in the least industrialised places, modern economic production extends its dictatorship in the form of a few 'star' commodities that form an imperialist domination imposed by the

regions that are advanced in the development of productivity, or in an advanced stage of capitalism. In these advanced modernised societies, where there is an abundance of commodities and technologies, the primary questions of survival have been resolved; they are liberated from nature, *but* they become dependent on the technology that freed them and are thus stuck in a vicious cycle of ‘increased survival’ (Debord 1983:40). In this cycle, primary human needs are replaced by the uninterrupted fabrication of ‘pseudo-needs’ (Debord 1983:51). The primary function of the spectacle is to create these pseudo-needs and to associate commodities with the satisfaction of these needs. However, commodities only hold the promise of satisfaction, but never deliver, thus resulting in a state of increased deprivation (Debord 1983:43). In this way the spectacle, because of its drug-like characteristics, can be described as an opium war on society (Debord 1983:45). The celebrity is an example of spectacle in that it is the commodification and spectacular representation of the human being (Debord 1983:60).

Similarly, Baudrillard (1970), in his book, *The consumer society: myths and structures*, also analyses this commodification process. Baudrillard (1970:25) explains that the profusion of objects, or commodities has led to a fundamental mutation of the ecology of the human species. Today humans are not surrounded by other humans, but by objects. There is also the permanent spectacle and celebration of the object in advertising and in hundreds of daily messages from the mass media. Baudrillard (1970:25) argues that the objects are changing culture: “Just as the wolf-child became the wolf by living among wolves, so we too are slowly becoming functional”. According to Baudrillard the pace of our lives has quickened because we live at the pace of objects. Jameson (1983:124)

similarly points out the ever more rapid rhythm of style and fashion changes. Thus, what these theorists suggest is that our identities have changed in nature from being human to being more like objects in a process referred to as 'dehumanisation'.

Furthermore, as a result of being surrounded by the images and signs of the mass media, or spectacle, which has a disorienting effect and separates people from 'reality', contemporary society can be seen as being in a schizophrenic state. Schizophrenia is a long-term mental disorder marked by a withdrawal from reality into fantasy and delusion (*Concise Oxford English dictionary* 2007:1046). According to Jameson (1983:118), people have become incapable of dealing with the present realities and seek the past through a pastiche of pop images and stereotypes about the past. This, he says, is evident when one notes the success of the nostalgia industry. Jameson highlights the success of films like *Star wars* (1977), which he describes as a nostalgia film that harks back to the television series *Buck Rogers* (1939). Thus, contemporary society can be seen to desire a withdrawal from reality, indicating a schizophrenic state, and thus affecting identity. Furthermore, Baudrillard (1998:445) explains that there is an over-proximity and an over-exposure of all things leaving the subject in a state of extreme confusion, unable to produce the limits of his or her being: the subject "becomes a pure screen, a pure absorption and resorption surface of the influent networks." Similarly, according to Jameson (1983:120) the world comes before the schizophrenic in a heightened intensity, but it is felt as loss and as unreality. Just as the repetition of the same word over and over results in the word (signifier) losing all its meaning (signified) and only retaining its sound, the schizophrenic individual loses the meaning of his world and all that remains is

the image. Benjamin (2004:793-794) notices the depreciation of presence in time and space that a mass reproduced image has when compared to an original work of art that retains its historical and traditional value. Many reproductions substitute a plurality of copies for a unique existence. Furthermore, Benjamin (2004:795) points out that the adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of infinite scope. An example that Benjamin (2004:802) gives is the celebrity that does not preserve the unique aura of a person but the fake spell of a commodity. Thus we have a contemporary world consisting only out of signifiers leading to a general state of schizophrenia.

In a similar vein to Debord, Herbert Marcuse (1998:279-283), in *One-dimensional man*, also analyses how false needs (or pseudo-needs) effect society. He distinguishes between alien needs and vital needs. Marcuse (1998:280) believes that it is possible for technology to satisfy vital needs, but this is not currently the case. He calls for new modes of realisation that correspond to the new capabilities of society because individual thought is currently absorbed by mass communication and indoctrination. The most effective and enduring form of warfare against liberation from this indoctrination is the implanting of material and intellectual needs that perpetuate obsolete forms of the struggle of existence. Marcuse (1998:281) states: “The most prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to this category of false needs.” Because of the indoctrination and manipulation, individuals are unable to judge what their real needs are. Baudrillard (1998:444) points out that the environment is so saturated by images and sounds of the

mass media and that the pressure of all that wants to be heard is so strong that one is no longer capable of knowing what one wants. Society has been stupefied, made unable to think or feel properly and thus individuals have mistakenly taken the false needs as their own. Marcuse (1998:282) argues that a repressive administration of society makes unimaginable the means by which individuals might break free from their addiction and seize their own liberation. He proposes that the optimal goal is the replacement of false needs by true ones, which means the abandonment of repressive satisfaction. According to Marcuse (1998:282) free choice does not signify freedom if the things chosen sustain social controls over a life of toil and fear. The false needs in the form of commodities indoctrinate and manipulate society in that they promote a false consciousness, which is immune against its own falsehood. Marcuse (1998:284) explains that repressive satisfaction becomes a way of life, which is mistakenly seen as a good way of life, much better than before – and as a good way of life, it militates against a qualitative change. This is how a pattern of one-dimensional thought and behaviour is formed, where ambitions and purposes that rise above the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to the terms of this universe. Furthermore, Marcuse (1998:284) calls for the protection of nature from an all too sweeping commercialisation and argues that “advanced industrial society is approaching the stage where continued progress would demand the radical subversion of the prevailing direction”. Thus we have become beings programmed by the mass media, unable to think properly, and we have in this dehumanising process lost important parts of ourselves and dimensions of our lives.

Another voice that addresses postmodern identity is postcolonialism, an intellectual discourse that addresses the third-world subject's position in relation to the first-world. Among the seminal theorists in this area is Franz Fanon (2000:23-26), who questions Western metanarratives of progress and urges previously colonised societies to move away from European standards. In his book *Orientalism* (1978), postcolonial theorist Edward Said (1935-2003) investigates the way that Western narratives about the Orient are bound up within the politics of the West and counters these narratives with his own alternative narratives (Woods 1999:42). The poststructuralist, Gayatri Spivak (b.1942) examines the postcolonial issue of building ethical relationships between the first and third worlds and Homi K. Bhabha (b.1949), another prominent postcolonial theorist, investigates the creation of a 'third' space that has occurred as a result of the interaction between first and third world cultures (Woods 1999:44). This study will introduce postcolonialism through the Vietnamese postcolonial theorist, academic, writer and composer Trinh T. Minha (b.1952). What makes her relevant to the topic of this study is the fact that she is also a filmmaker. Her most noted work is her book, *When the moon waxes red* (1991) but this paper will focus on an interview where she raises some important postcolonial issues and explains how they inform her films *Reassemblage* (1982) and *Naked spaces: living is round* (1985).

Postcolonial discourse, like Trinh's⁵ (1992), is committed to deconstructing the authoritarian and logocentric metanarratives of European culture. In the earlier discussion on metanarratives in this chapter, we see how Lyotard questions the metanarrative of

⁵ In the Vietnamese name 'Trinh T. Minha' the surname is 'Trinh' according to Vietnamese custom.

science and progress. Scientific knowledge exists in opposition to narrative knowledge and holds itself to be superior to narrative knowledge. This kind of construct is referred to as a 'binary opposition' (scientific knowledge/narrative knowledge). Two other binary oppositions have been presented in this paper, namely the high/low art construct of Greenberg and the speech/writing construct that Derrida deconstructs. We see how Lyotard deconstructs the science knowledge/narrative knowledge opposition by pointing out that scientific knowledge relies on narrative knowledge to legitimate itself and that narrative knowledge defines what scientific knowledge is. Therefore, scientific knowledge's privileged position is problematised. When this kind of deconstruction is applied to binary oppositions like self/other, us/them, West/East, civilised/primitive and first-world/third-world, one enters the realm of postcolonialism (Ward 1997:106-107).

The function of binary oppositions is a subtle matter as, usually, when the first part is overtly stated it automatically implies the second part. An example that Trinh puts forward is the implied binary opposition intrinsic to the description of her films as 'personal' and 'subjective'. Implicit in these words are their oppositions: 'impersonal' and 'objective' respectively. But, Trinh (1992:364) argues that impersonal and objective films are impossible to make. Unavoidably, the filmmaker always is inextricably intertwined within his/her context and environment and imposes his/her own point of view. Filmic representation is entangled in questions of power and the production of meaning in that the process of materializing the subject on film and the positioning of the subject between frames results in the occurrence of many transformations, which Trinh (1992:359) realises is obscene. A documentary film by Trinh, *Reassemblage*, set in

Senegal, addresses the limits of the camera and of the onlooker (as filmmaker and as viewer) by using incomplete, sudden and unstable camera work, thereby presenting the film medium as an 'opaque text' as opposed to an innocent and transparent view on the reality and the representation of the Senegalese culture (Trinh 1992:361).

Like binary oppositions, the metanarratives within them assert themselves in a subtle way, as often they are so familiar or 'naturalised' within one's culture that it is often difficult to consciously detect. For example, in the process of filming Trinh (1992:360, 362-363) realises how her preoccupations, being an academic and theorist, often coincide with those of the metanarrative of traditional anthropology, which often focuses on fetishes, rituals and religious practices of the exotic 'Other'. By representing the inhabitants of foreign places as distant exotics they are emptied of their human traits, or dehumanised (they are seen as less than human), resulting in a prejudice that favours the civilised being over the 'primitive'. Trinh (1992:360) finds it necessary to challenge herself to be conscious of and to depart from these standardised and institutionalised norms and work independently from them.

In the refusal of these metanarratives, Trinh (1992:362) strives to have no single center in her films, whether it be in the form of a centering narrative, a representative individual, a unifying theme or a unifying area of interest. Common practice among filmmakers and photographers is to take many shots of the same subject and then to choose the best 'one', or they use a powerful zoom or a totalizing curvilinear travel shot. In *Reassemblage* Trinh (1992:361) instead takes many shots of the same Senegalese subject from slightly

different distances and angles and includes them all in the final edit resulting in a plurality of repetitions where each repetition is slightly different and where the subject cannot be centered within one frame. In this we can see the emphasis on the decentering and pluralism of postmodernism applied to the politics of representation of the colonised or post-colonised subject.

Also representative of this pluralistic trend to not give privilege to any one voice but to include many voices, is the inclusion of more than one narrator (or voice) in her film, *Naked spaces*, set in West Africa. In this film, there are three narrators: a low voice articulates the sayings of the village people and of African theorists, a high voice speaks according to Western logic and quotes Western thinkers and a mid range voice (Trinh's voice) relates personal feelings and observations. These three voices often overlap and say the same things. Here, Trinh (1992:372) points out how the different cultures of the first and third worlds affect each other and create an 'in-between' or hybrid culture. This is referred to as 'hybridity'. A similar term, 'liminality' also refers to an 'in-between' place of symbolic interaction between cultures (Woods 1999:44-5). These concepts fit with the poststructuralist attack on foundationalisms, totalities and essentialisms.

Another aspect that flows from the rejection of legitimating narratives is the violation or blurring of boundaries. What a metanarrative usually imposes is an established frame of thinking that becomes 'naturalised' and asserts itself as the only correct way of doing something, like making a documentary film. But Trinh (1992:369-370) points out that boundaries are extremely arbitrary in that they are conventional constructs with no claim

to intrinsic foundations. For example, the national boundaries in Africa are extremely arbitrary in that they were constructed along European political considerations and not according to any intrinsic 'truth' or 'reality'. Furthermore, the fact that these geopolitical boundaries cut across the cultural boundaries of ethnic groupings has become problematic. Trinh (1992:377) argues that the subject, when approaching and interacting with other cultures, needs to go through an initial stage where the self loses fixed boundaries, where one goes temporarily blind, as it were, and undergo a process of destabilisation. This experience can be disturbing yet it is a potentially empowering process of difference. Trinh (1992:364) expands:

If one is not even momentarily blind, if one remains as one is from the outside or from the inside, then it is unlikely that one can break through to that moment where suddenly everything stops, one's luggage is emptied out, and one moves in a state of unknowingness, where destabilised encounters with the "unfamiliar" or "unknown" are multiplied and experienced anew.

Here we can see the process of deconstruction and defamiliarisation in a postcolonial application.

In Trinh's experience of spending time within the remote and difficult to access villages of West Africa, where there is little modernisation, she is struck with the rhythm of life and labour in these societies. Trinh, as a composer, describes the daily interactions and relationships among people there as a form of music. She (1992:371) recalls:

The way an old woman spins cotton; the way a daughter and her mother move in syncopation while they pound or beat the grain together; the way a group of women chant and dance while plastering the floor of the front court in a house; or the way the different cultures counteract or harmonise with one another – these are the everyday rhythms and music of life. In such environments one realises how much modern society is based on compartmentalisation – the mentality colonialism has spread.

What Trinh questions here in a general sense is the modern lifestyle and the Western metanarrative of progress through modernisation, in that the ‘un’-modernised lifestyle retains a valuable fullness of community that many modernised cultures struggle to retain.

This chapter established a brief overview of those aspects of postmodernism that are relevant to the *Qatsi* trilogy, such as the deconstruction of modern metanarratives, pluralism, the production of meaning and reality as described by poststructuralism, the formation of identity in a modernised environment and in third-world relationships to these advanced modernised societies in postcolonial discourses. It has shown that postmodernism is a broad field concerned with many contemporary issues that face the world today. The next chapter will focus on how the *Qatsi* trilogy reflects some of these postmodern aspects in its style and content.

Chapter 3: The *Qatsi* trilogy

The *Qatsi* trilogy is an informal name given collectively to the films *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983), *Powaqqatsi* (1988) and *Naqoyqatsi* (2002). They are all full-length feature films, eighty-seven, ninety-nine and eighty-nine minutes respectively. In terms of genre, they could be described as nonnarrative documentaries, but they have also been described as contemporary art films and as concert cinema (Naqoyqatsi 2003; Naqoyqatsi S.a.). As with the production of any film, this trilogy is not the work of one person, but a collaboration of many people, each making their own contribution. The two main proponents are Godfrey Reggio (b.1940), the director and producer and Philip Glass (b.1937), the composer of the music in the trilogy. Reggio (2002c) describes Glass' contribution to the films as a 'hand-in-glove' operation, where at different times the music and Reggio's direction take turns to lead and influence each other in the creation process. Another notable collaborator whom Reggio (2002a) praises, calling him a cinematic genius, is Ron Fricke, who is the cinematographer for *Koyaanisqatsi*. The trilogy has gained considerable commercial success, especially considering its off-mainstream nonnarrative style, has gained critical success and has had a marked influence on other films, videos and commercials (Dempsey 1989:2; McCormick 2005:27; Arthur 2002:73).

At the core of the *Qatsi* trilogy's content is a message about modernity and the modern way of life. The word 'qatsi' itself means 'way of life' and each film is an extension of this message. This chapter will go on to explain this message and highlight its

postmodern alignments. This chapter will also discuss the trilogy in terms of its style and how this reflects aspects of postmodernism. Firstly, this chapter will look at Reggio's background, as it contributes to the understanding of these films and helps illustrate the films' postmodern aspects, then this chapter will discuss the *Qatsi* trilogy as a whole, before going on to discuss each film separately. A brief description of each film will be given in the section dedicated to it and each film will be analysed in light of the postmodern discussion in the previous chapter.

3.1 Godfrey Reggio

Reggio, born in 1940 in New Orleans, Louisiana, has had a remarkable life quite different from that of the average American. At the age of 14, after growing up too fast and coming to the end of what he describes as a life lived 'la dolce vita', he craved something more meaningful, and being idealistic at that age and being influenced by spiritual role models he joined the Christian Brothers, a Roman Catholic pontifical order in Santa Fe (Reggio 1992:381). There he spent 14 years in humility, fasting and prayer. He (1989:2) describes his experience there thus:

I lived in the Middle Ages ... I was in a very strict, ascetic community and was practicing asceticism at 14. It made a tremendous impression on me. It also made me very crazy, because ... [the monks, who] were basically Calvinists, actually believed that the body was evil ... I had to have my head shaved, and I lived a very strict life of silence and manual labour and study from the age of 14 until 23; then I was more out in the world but still with vows and a member of the community... I took it all very seriously. I wanted to be a saint, like you're supposed to want to be ... I collected holy cards, not baseball cards.

While in the monastery, Reggio began to do community work in the more poverty-stricken areas of Santa Fe. He focused on working with the youth who had formed a

series of gangs in the area and this experience influenced him greatly. Reggio (1992:381-2) explains that the analysis that makes up the metaphysical base for the *Qatsi* trilogy did not come from academia or from intellectual study, but from experiencing the sad reality that he was encountering daily for almost nine years working on the streets. As a result of all he witnessed during this time, he believes that the causal elements of deprivation, disenfranchisement, violence and all the accoutrements that go with that type of life come from the overall society, from the commodification of all aspects of life and the transformation of life into a spectacle removed from reality.

In Reggio's life as a monk, a lifestyle of strict asceticism, it can be seen how he developed a distance from the modern lifestyle. Instead of being surrounded by advertisements, television and other forms of mass media and spectacle, he was surrounded by spiritual role models practicing a life of strict silence, fasting, prayer and study. This distance from the modern world gave Reggio a perspective that those more inured in the society of the spectacle might not have (McCormick 2005:27). This, coupled with his first-hand experience of modern environments through his life and work on the streets, makes him capable of recognizing and questioning the metanarratives of modern society and identifying the problems that accompany the postmodern experience.

While working in this community, he came across the film, *Los Olvidados* (1950), translated as *The young and the damned* or *The forgotten ones*, by Luis Buñuel, about a group of destitute children living in the slums of Mexico City. In a discussion panel at New York University, he (2002c) describes his experience of this film as a deep spiritual

experience that touched his soul and that profoundly influenced him. Reggio (1992: 381) realised then that if the film could touch him so profoundly, he could use film to touch others, and states “I felt that if I could be touched that deeply by this medium, it was worth exploring.” Reggio bought a copy of *Los Olvidados* in sixteen millimeter and screened it weekly for the gangsters and young people with whom he was working and he likens those screenings in those days to going to church. With this film he organised the gangs into a group called *Young citizens for action*. He believes that film is not meant to be merely entertainment, but rather a medium of the twenty-first century with which he can touch other people’s souls.

Once he had left the Christian Brothers order, his first project was a large media campaign, done under the auspices of the *Institute for Regional Education*, a media collective that Reggio co-founded with three other persons (Reggio 1992:383). The campaign dealt with invasions of privacy and the use of technology to control behaviour. This campaign was very successful and reached many people through the mass media, namely, television, newspapers, billboards and the radio. After trying another more ambitious campaign, that unfortunately was not as successful, he turned to film, where he felt that he could communicate more effectively. Reggio explains (1992:382) that:

The larger society had changed – a culture of aurality had given way to cultures of literacy, and more recently, to the culture of image. I realised that if I wanted to communicate to the larger society about the world I was seeing – recognising that people learn in terms of what they already know – the most appropriate thing I could do would be to communicate with my audience in the form they had come to accept: film.

It is at this point that Reggio embarked on what evolved into the epic project of making the *Qatsi* trilogy, a project that took twenty-five years to complete. Today, Reggio is prominent as a filmmaker because of his contribution of the *Qatsi* films.

3.2 The *Qatsi* trilogy

As with any trilogy, there are certain unifying themes and threads that tie the three entities together. This section discusses the various themes and aspects of the *Qatsi* films as a trilogy - the aspects that apply to all three films - and highlights their postmodern elements. Firstly, this section explains the strange titles and why Reggio chose such an unusual way to name his films. Secondly, this section looks at Reggio's cinematic style and how it reflects various aspects of postmodernism. Lastly this section introduces the central theme in the *Qatsi* films, which, as will become clear in this study, can be seen to coincide with postmodern themes.

All three films are framed between an opening title sequence in the beginning and a definition of that title at the end. These titles and their definitions represent the only words in the films. The Hopi word 'qatsi' means 'life' and when compounded it indicates 'way of life'. In each of the titles 'qatsi' is compounded with another word in the Hopi language, resulting in a different meaning in each case. Briefly, *Koyaanisqatsi* can be interpreted as 'a way of life that calls for another way of living', *Powaqqatsi* means 'a way of life that feeds on others to advance itself' and *Naqoyqatsi* means 'life as war' (Reggio 2002a; 2002b; 2002c). Originally, when making *Koyaanisqatsi*, Reggio wanted an image for the title of the film. He wanted to use the language of image and sound and

extend that to the title (Reggio 2002c). But, this would have created too many problems for distribution and the producers insisted on the film having a title that conformed to the conventions of filmmaking practice. Reggio considers the English language to be in a state of decline in that it has lost the ability to adequately describe the modern world because embedded within the English language is a whole set of cultural preconceptions or baggage, which he did not want to bring to the titles of the films. So Reggio, making a compromise, decided to use a non-Western language, that would be unfamiliar to most people, namely the Hopi language, the oldest language among the Native Americans. The Hopis are a people indigenous to North America and thus Hopi is a language not of the modern world, but free of Western cultural baggage and signifying another metaphysical point of view (Reggio 2002a; 2002c). Reggio (1992:382) states that he felt differently about the Hopi language as its words had not been devalued. He explains that he had a synchronicity with the Hopi in worldview in that everything the Western world calls normal, the Hopi would call abnormal and everything the Western world call sane, they would consider insane. By using an unfamiliar language that comes from a non-Western ideological background we can see Reggio's intention to deconstruct Western metanarratives and present a worldview from the perspective of the 'Other'. In this way he also begins a process of defamiliarisation, which is sustained throughout the films. Here, by confronting the audience with a 'strange' language he primes them with a defamiliarising device, which prepares them for more unusual experiences to come.

A further unusual feature common to all three films is their decentering nonnarrative style and it is a cinematic style for which Reggio has become known. It features a

pioneering arrangement of image and sound that does not privilege the one over the other. Common practice in mainstream filmmaking uses cinematography and music as a background for the script, actors, character development and plot, but in the style of these films, by removing the elements that usually form the focus of attention, Reggio foregrounds the cinematography and the music and they play equal roles in influencing and creating the film experience. In this way image and sound are presented as alternative primary cinematic languages, as opposed to a script or words, and become devices that sustain the defamiliarisation process. The viewer is estranged by this new communicative setup and becomes aware of himself/herself seeing and hearing, or perceiving and in this way this cinematic style has a deconstructive element. Because of the absence of conventional elements and the unusual foregrounding of the image and sound the *Qatsi* trilogy can be said to be a nonnarrative film trilogy and has a decentering quality. The trilogy aims to destabilise the metanarratives of conventional film experience and attempts to unload the preconceptions that accompany them.

The style of the *Qatsi* films shows that they were sculpted for multivalency. The style promotes a space for viewers to insert their own meanings and interpretations. The viewer must fill in much of the data and while Reggio does have his own specific meaning for these films, he does not insist that everyone should derive his meaning, or take on his point of view. He (1992:389) states: “I look at the structure of each film in a ‘trilectic’ sense. There’s the image, there’s the music and there’s the viewer, each with a point of view casting a particular shadow”. Also, he feels that there must be an ambiguity built into the films if they are going to be art. Otherwise they would become driving,

didactic and propagandistic. Furthermore, Reggio (1992:389) explains: “I wanted to make the films as pliable and amorphous as possible”. Thus, the *Qatsi* films tend towards a postmodern pluralism in that they are multivalent and open to many meanings, interpretations and experiences. This fits in with poststructuralist anti-foundationalism in that they emphasise the play of sound and image in the production of meanings and do not promote a single meaning based on fixed and stable structures.

While the cinematic style has a decentering quality, there is a central theme that runs through all three films, and Reggio (2002a) explains that:

What I tried to show is that the main event today is not seen by those of us that live in it. We see the surface of newspapers, the obviousness of conflict, of social injustice, of the market [and] the welling up of culture. But, to me, the greatest event, or the most important event of our entire history - nothing comparable to this event has gone as fundamentally unnoticed - ... is: ... the transiting from old nature or the natural environment as host of life for human habitation into a technological milieu, into mass technology as the environment of life.

Each film in the *Qatsi* trilogy develops this theme, illuminating the various aspects and consequences of this transformation. As this paper discusses each film in the *Qatsi* trilogy, it will become clear what these films are suggesting about this event and that in many ways they coincide with postmodern themes.

3.3 Koyaanisqatsi

Reggio (2002a) explains that *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983) is a film about the Northern hemisphere, which includes the cultures of America, Western Europe and Japan. Since

these cultures epitomise the hypo-kinetic industrial world of high technology and modernity, *Koyaanisqatsi* is a critique on modernity.

Koyaanisqatsi commences with an opening sequence where its title, in this case the word ‘Koyaanisqatsi’, is slowly revealed in bold red lettering, growing vertically up and down from the center, in a way that could call to mind the awakening of a multi-eyed beast. The font gives the ‘eyes’ a mechanical or cyborg quality. Accompanying this is Glass’ tone-setting, somber organ composition with deep chorus vocals that chant the title. The definition for *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983) displayed at the end of the film is as follows:

Ko-yaa-nis-qatsi (from the Hopi language), **n.** **1.** crazy life. **2.** life in turmoil. **3.** life out of balance. **4.** life disintegrating. **5.** a state of life that calls for another way of living.

In Hopi mythology, ‘koyaanis’ is a plague that occurs in the underworld (Reggio 2002a). The definition describes the contemporary modern way of life as something that needs to change and as something unfitting or inappropriate for human beings. Thus, from the definition it is clear that *Koyaanisqatsi* is a critique on life in the Western world and modernity. Similarly, much of postmodern discourse is a critique on modernity and therefore is a postmodern aspect of the film.

Koyaanisqatsi is also framed by two other elements. Firstly, there are sequences depicting ancient Hopi cave paintings at the beginning and end of the film and secondly, there is scene of a NASA shuttle launch in the beginning and a scene of the shuttle’s heart-rending and catastrophic explosion at the end, where one can see one of the pilot’s

parachutes deploying and being engulfed in huge balls of flame. Here we see the film framed in the antagonistic relationship between the non-Western world, represented by the Hopi cave paintings, and the modernity of the West, represented by one of its crowning technological achievements: space exploration.

Between these frames, *Koyaanisqatsi* can roughly be split into three parts, which represent three kinds of environments. In the first part smooth pans and fluid camera movements depict scenes of untouched pristine deserts, rolling clouds, boiling waterfalls and surging oceans all devoid of human habitation. This is followed by ever increasing signs of human endeavor in straight-ahead-flyover scenes over artificial bodies of water, such as dams and pools at curing plants. The presence of human influence grows ever more prominent in flyovers of open mining operations, the smoke stacks of factories, electricity pylons and large-scale agricultural plantations. The film then progresses to some of the bastions of modernity in America and its most prominent super-cities, namely New York, Los Angeles and Las Vegas, where the hustle and bustle of city life is represented in a plethora of different shots and angles in scenes of fast moving traffic, people walking and working at high speed, interacting and merging with machines in sausage factories, fast food outlets, malls, supermarkets, office cubicles, escalators, assembly lines, money counters and postal sorting machines. Extreme high angle shots glorify gleaming skyscrapers clad in reflective glass, billboards and advertisements, one of them promising a “barrel of fun”, and music in the form of celebratory cantatas of simultaneously ascending and descending scales accompany scenes of a modern housing project (Priutt Igoe) being demolished. Elsewhere, the similar forms and structures in

urban layouts and microchips are juxtaposed and individual people in this urban environment are foregrounded in seemingly out of place slow-motion 'cameos', revealing in some cases the soul-annihilating regimentation and schizophrenic effects of this way of life all done in the name of progress, technological happiness and modernity. In the nature scenes there is the grandness of landscapes, the mystery of nature's functions and a slow, infinite sense of time untouched by the complications, desires and conflicts of humanity. In the intermediate environment we see how technology is employed to tap the natural resources that sustain the cities. In the city environment of spectacle and simulation where the commodification of life and the overabundance of images are rife, excess, acceleration and disorientation are presented as primary qualities of life through the use of time-lapse photography and a hectic montage of disparate, disorienting and decentering sequences that seem to continue endlessly as the viewer is bombarded and overwhelmed with images and sounds, all without narrative explication.

The overarching theme that emerges in *Koyaanisqatsi* is a juxtaposition of the natural world and the synthetic world of modern technological society, as MacDonald (1992:378) states: "Koyaanisqatsi attempts to create a provocative contrast between the natural world, as epitomised by the American Southwest, and modern technological society, as epitomised by the contemporary American city." This juxtaposition embodies Reggio's (1992:380) attempt to "show in nature the presence of a life form, an Entity, a Beingness, and in the synthetic world the presence of a different entity, a consuming and inhuman entity." Furthermore, these qualities of excess, acceleration and disorientation largely go unnoticed and unquestioned.

Reggio uses time-lapse extensively to communicate the experience of this excess, acceleration and disorientation. He stumbled across this technique in low visibility commercial work and was also exposed to *Organism* (1975), a film by Hilary Harris, which employed time-lapse footage of the urban environment. Although the time-lapse sequences were too short and *Organism* celebrated modernity, Reggio felt that time-lapse was the language that was missing from the film that could be used to create the experience of acceleration, as Reggio (1992:388) explains, “in the case of *Koyaanisqatsi* we were looking at a very accelerated world, a world of density, of critical mass, and I felt that the technique of time-lapse would be extremely important in articulating an experience of the subject.” Though *Koyaanisqatsi* did not pioneer time-lapsing, since it has been around since the camera was invented, the film did pick up on something new by using time-lapse as a main cinematic language. Since *Koyaanisqatsi* this technique has inundated the media (Reggio 1992:387-388). *Koyaanisqatsi* has indeed had a marked effect on cultural production in advertisement, video and film. For example, its influence on Madonna’s favourite video maker, Jonas Åkerlund, can be seen in the music video for *Ray of light* (1998) and its inspiration to MTV’s *Chillout zone* is also evident (Naqoyqatsi 2003:118).

There are several parallels to postmodernism here. Firstly, the use of time-lapse can be seen as a defamiliarisation device that effectively sets the familiar on a slight edge, thus imbuing the ordinary and mundane with the new and unfamiliar. It re-inscribes on a sensual level the unnoticed familiar and has a deconstructive element. Secondly, the time-

lapse technique combined with the disorienting and overwhelming montage of image and sound communicates the postmodern subject experience, which is often coded as disorienting, disturbing and decentering. Thirdly, in this world of simulation, with its excess of signs and sounds and their acceleration, Baudrillard's ideas of hyperreality, which annihilates the real, is demonstrated. Fourthly, according to MacDonald (1992:380) time-lapse has the effect of reducing individual action to patterns. What he means is that once the individual movements of people are accelerated, they lose their uniqueness and become homogeneous. Thus, *Koyaanisqatsi* in this way conveys a postmodern sentiment that accuses modernity of the homogenisation of society. And lastly, in this accelerated state people seem to become less human and seem to become more like frenzied robots or machines. Thus it emphasises the integration of the postmodern subject into the technological environment, which results in his/her dehumanisation in that he/she loses some of his/her human qualities and takes on machine-like qualities, becoming cyborged. Such cyborgation has a profound effect on identity formation.

One of the ambiguities in *Koyaanisqatsi*, that may lead one to interpret the film as a celebration of modernity, is that, while it is an anti-technology film, it portrays the urban environment with such beauty. Firstly there is the brilliant cinematography, showing scenes of shimmering city lights at night and scenes of gleaming, stately skyscrapers. The scenes of the demolition of Pruitt Igoe are mesmerizing and even more difficult scenes that convey people in a catastrophic situation, perhaps an earthquake, are somehow beautiful. Then there is the provocative, intense and stimulating music that accompanies

the cinematography, creating an overall, impressive cinematic experience. Reggio (2002a; 1992:389; 2002c) explains that he wants to reveal the beauty of the 'Beast'. What *Koyaanisqatsi* communicates is that while the spectacle of technology and the modern city may appear beautiful to Western eyes, under the shiny surface there lurks something threatening and potentially catastrophic and that the West is worshipping at the trough of this Beast. This comes through very effectively (and quite humorously) in a scene of a Jumbo airliner slowly taxiing toward the camera through shimmering heat waves in a zoomed-in medium shot that lasts approximately one minute. As this plane taxis away to the left, it is replaced by another identical plane that comes in from the left, turns and continues to move toward the camera. This time however the plane suddenly trespasses some kind of boundary as it suddenly becomes menacing and monster-like (its cockpit windows transforming into eyes) as it threatens to move out of the screen and into the audience. Similarly to Debord, Jameson and Baudrillard, Reggio (1992:389) argues that the modern industrialised city appears beautiful to those who live in it because, "all one can see is one layer of commodity piled upon another. There is no ability to see beyond, to see that we [Westerners] have encased ourselves in an artificial environment".

Koyaanisqatsi depicts the spectacle of commodity-saturated streets where people are surrounded daily by thousands of purchasable items and the torrent of images from the mass media that advertise these items.

The general schizophrenic state caused by the spectacle, where the hyperreal replaces the real, is epitomised in some poignant out-of-place 'cameos' of individuals living within this urban environment. Some of these subjects have a blithe quality, such as the garish

casino girls in Las Vegas and a bizarrely dressed ‘hunk’ with big muscles and side-burns, while others are darker, such as two insane-looking old men, the one with a stoic, vacant expression and the other maniacally staring into the camera.

While *Koyaanisqatsi* has gained positive reviews it has also received its share of negative ones. According to Macdonald (1992:380), “Reggio has frequently been criticised for his naiveté in participating in the very patterns he pretends to abhor: *Koyaanisqatsi* is an anti-technology film but it was produced not only with technological means but with the most technologically advanced cinematic means available.” But Reggio responds by saying that he embraces the contradiction of using technology to criticise technology, as Reggio (1992:390) explains: “I felt that I had to embrace the contradiction and walk on the edge, using the very tools I was criticising to make the statement I was making – knowing that people learn in terms of what they already know.” Similarly, Derrida uses the same paradoxical strategy, in that he uses the tools of philosophy to deconstruct philosophy, boring from within, and *Koyaanisqatsi* deconstructs the metanarrative of modern technological society with the tools of this society.

3.4 Powaqqatsi

One would perhaps expect *Powaqqatsi* to be a *Koyaanisqatsi* II, with more traffic, urban scenes and spectacle; instead *Powaqqatsi* develops and expands Reggio’s vision. While *Koyaanisqatsi* was about the Northern hemisphere, a world of high kinetic energy and acceleration, *Powaqqatsi* is about the Southern hemisphere, showing a fundamentally different world, but also a world in transformation.

In broad strokes, *Powaqqatsi* can be divided into two parts. The first part depicts cultures that can be said to live and work in ‘natural’ settings or environments that have seen little modernisation, where small village communities are beating grain, fishing, harvesting, carrying loads on their heads, collecting firewood, toiling at their crops, worshipping and dancing with their families. In the second part a train sequence takes us to a different situation where people are seen living and working in more modernised environments that have been transformed to be more like those found in the Northern hemisphere. Here the film resembles *Koyaanisqatsi* in that disorienting camera tilts and rapid-cuts portray traffic and people moving to-and-fro in an antagonistic relationship. Commuters are seen squashed together in passenger cars and fighting each other to get into overcrowded busses. Flyovers and slow pans show a multitude of apartments stacked hundreds of floors high in towering apartment blocks and spectators at a sports event are shown in gaudy plastic hats and other cheap marketing paraphernalia. In a vertical travel shot that moves up through the floors of an office block, the bleak, soul-annihilating office spaces under fluorescent lighting are revealed. In between these two parts in the film, an upward vertical pan glorifies a broadcasting tower followed by a montage of Western television advertisements glamourising commodities ranging from cosmetics to bubblegum to toothpaste and local news programmes that depict scenes of war and politics.

Evident from the above is the distinct juxtaposition between the beauty of life in un-modernised areas and the frenzy of life in the newly modernised cities. Thus *Powaqqatsi*

shows a world in transformation from the natural to the synthetic. To see how this transformation occurs, it will be helpful to look at the definition of the title of the film. The Hopi word 'powaqa' means black magician, a person who eats the life of another person in order to advance his or her own way of life. The modus operandi of a 'powaqa' is allurement and seduction. The compound 'powaqqatsi' means a way of life that consumes another way of life in order to advance itself (Reggio 2002c). Thus, the title suggests that people are being seduced by the allure of modernity, and the broadcasting tower and advertisement montage suggest that the mass media have a large role to play in this process. MacDonald (1992:380) gives his analysis of the film in this quote:

Powaqqatsi is an immense montage of individuals labouring – and to a lesser degree, celebrating, worshipping and relaxing – in Peru, Brasil, Kenya, Egypt, Nepal and India. The focus on third-world labour is contextualised by sequences that represent the allure of the industrialised world, especially as it is marketed on television, an allure that, as *Powaqqatsi* reveals, is already transforming the Southern hemisphere.

Thus, *Powaqqatsi* is a critique of the consummation of the Southern hemisphere or the third-world by first-world modernist metanarratives of progress, modernisation and globalisation, forming the trilogy's strongest statement along postcolonial themes.

Accompanying these issues, is the problematics of postmodern identity. For example, *Powaqqatsi* grapples with postcolonial identity politics by deconstructing dehumanising Western metanarratives supported by the 'civilised/primitive' binary opposition. Instead of presenting the 'primitive' village communities as less than human, without dignity, poor and in need of aid, they are presented as convivial and healthy forms of society in many ways better than 'civilised' or modern societies. Indicative of this, are scenes of fathers and mothers working in close proximity to their sons and daughters, as opposed to

the segregated and compartmentalised situation in modernised societies where parents commute to work away from their children and families. Furthermore, the hands and feet of the men and women in these ‘primitive’ communities are depicted covered in dust and mud, showing that they strive with nature for survival, maintaining a close relationship with nature, as opposed to the ‘increased survival’ conditions in modernised societies, where many people strive to work in clean and sanitised office environments that are separated from nature. A contentious issue for Reggio (1992:392) that comes through in *Powaqqatsi* is the fundamental way in which Western society confuses simple living and poverty. This suggests that the West views certain cultures without modernised standards of living as underprivileged and in desperate need. Though there is a driving poverty in many areas, Reggio (2002b) points out that it is detrimental and damaging to confuse a culture’s simple way of life with poverty. Thus *Powaqqatsi* attempts to deconstruct and destabilise preconceived ideas or boundaries revolving around third-world subject identity.

In the second part of *Powaqqatsi*, which depicts the newly modernised and industrialised cities in transformation, people have lost touch with their simple ways of life and, through the seduction of the spectacle and the mass media, enter into a state of ‘increased survival’ and false needs to which they have become enslaved. In an episode of *Ray Mears: bushcraft* (BBC Knowledge, 2009), Ray Mears illustrates a small step in this process. A small tribe in the Amazon, who used to irrigate their crops by traditional methods, now irrigate their crops by means of plastic buckets that they have obtained from the modern world. This has made the task of irrigation easier for them, but now they

have to spend more time growing more crops to make more money to buy more buckets. Thus, they have become dependant, or addicted to something, which is essentially a false need, because they were coping without plastic buckets for as long they have existed as a culture; hundreds of years, perhaps even millennia. Thus, although they have been liberated from a primary survival problem, they have now entered into a state of 'increased survival' that enslaves them to their false-needs. In societies that have experienced a higher level of modernisation, such as those in the latter half of *Powaqqatsi*, this process is in a much more amplified state, but the same principle is at work. Through the seduction and allurement of modernity and through the spectacle of the mass media, people have become convinced of and are enslaved by needs that are essentially false and they have entered into a state of 'increased survival'. This, in turn, has led to a transformation in identity as societies in these areas are homogenised, commoditised and separated from 'reality' by the excess and spectacular representations of this modernised environment.

One of the criticisms leveled against *Powaqqatsi* is that the people portrayed in the movie are not contextualised and therefore become dehumanised, distant exotics or 'others'. But Reggio (1992:388) responds by saying that it was an intentional decision. What he wanted to show is what he refers to as the "mystery of unity through diversity" or the "simultaneity of life". The first part of the film portrays many similarities between different peoples in the South, revealing a certain inexplicable unity. There are scenes of people from places that span four continents of the Southern hemisphere, doing remarkably similar things, such as labouring, celebrating and worshipping. This is

contrasted to the way in which unity is achieved through homogenisation in industrial cities. Reggio (1992:389) points out that in modernised societies, “the human being is no longer the measure of life: we’ve been crushed into a synthetic environment that is no longer human. But in the South, which represents maybe two-thirds of the [world’s] population, the human being is still the measure of life.” In this way, *Powaqqatsi* acknowledges the postmodern belief that identities in mechanised and modernised environments are constricted and transformed by inhuman factors that conform to Western metanarratives of progress. Furthermore, Reggio (2002b) argues that these un-modernised cultures are, “the most fragile because they are the most human, and they are the most human because [in them] it is still human beings, in smaller groupings, through their own cultures, coming up with the differentiation and beauty of life.” As discussed in the previous chapter, differentiation, diversification, pluralism, hybridity and liminality are postmodern trends and that while there is no going back to the teepee or the cave, real progress lies in more convivial, decentralised and diversified forms of society. The aphorism that Reggio (2002b) makes for *Powaqqatsi* is, “divided we stand”.

In contrast to *Koyaanisqatsi*’s time-lapse, *Powaqqatsi* uses slow-motion as a main cinematic language and defamiliarisation device, especially in the first part of the film, to emphasise the difference between the modernised and un-modernised worlds. This is because, according to Reggio (1992:388), “in the case of *Powaqqatsi*, we’re looking at [an un-modernised] world that is intrinsically slow, that lives with the rhythms of nature, that is diversified, that is the opposite of the high kinetic energy of the industrial world.” The difference is immediately apparent in terms of cinematic experience. The viewer,

instead of being overwhelmed by a surge of disorienting movement, can at leisure soak up the images, seeing all kinds of detail and nuance that would otherwise be overlooked. What can also be seen as a result of the slow-motion is a romantic grace and dignity in the mundane, everyday functions of people in their lives and labour. In the close-ups of people's faces, even though they are not made up and they are not particularly 'good-looking' (by Western standards) or even though, in some cases, they are old and wrinkled, there is still a dignity and an impression of beauty. Reggio (1992:388) explains that the use of slow-motion is, "not to romanticise the subject, but to monumentalise it so that we [can] look at it from a different point of view". Thus, slow-motion is used as a defamiliarisation device that helps to deconstruct the 'self/other' and 'primitive/civilised' binary oppositions, destabilising preconceived boundaries about the concepts of poverty and simple living, and deconstructing modern metanarratives of progress.

3.5 Naqoyqatsi

While *Koyaanisqatsi* is about the North and *Powaqqatsi* is about the South, *Naqoyqatsi*'s subject is the entire globe. Reggio (2002a; 2002c) points out that *Naqoyqatsi* is an expression of the "globalised moment in which we all are." *Naqoyqatsi* is also more abstract than the first two films, less apparent, requiring more work on the part of the viewer. Furthermore, the locations for the other two films are real locations that were shot by a crew, but in the case of *Naqoyqatsi* most of the footage is stock footage, thus the location for *Naqoyqatsi* is the virtual (Reggio 2002c).

The root of the Hopi word 'naqoy' can be translated as 'each other - many kill'.

Naqoyqatsi can thus be said to mean 'a life of killing', 'war as a way of life' or 'civilised violence'. According to Reggio (2002a) *Naqoyqatsi* is about a war that goes beyond the battlefield, "It is a total war. It is war as ordinary daily living." He points out that it is hard to see when one is inside or part of this war. This kind of war is a sanctioned terror on the force of life or a kind of civilised violence.

Naqoyqatsi is divided into ten chapters that look into the beginnings of modernity, its creation, the present state and result of its creation and then looks into the future, asking the question, "Where are we headed and what will become of us?". The film starts at the beginning of modernity's conception, opening with Bruegel's painting *The tower of Babel* (1563), which depicts the biblical story of man's endeavor to pursue his own will in his own power (Gen 11:1-9). Then the film cuts to scenes in the present of a ruined and deserted building, *Michigan Central Station* (1913), whose neo-classical architectural style resembles the classical style of the tower of Babel in Bruegel's painting (Reggio 2002c). In this sequence, history is compressed into a few minutes as the viewer contemplates a bible story from the beginning of recorded history, the end of the middle-ages and the beginning of modernity in the sixteenth century, the height of modernism in the twentieth century and its decline in recent times. Modernity is likened to the tower of Babel, the building of which ends in disaster as, in the biblical story, God frustrates the will of men, confuses their language and scatters them throughout the world. It is clear from the outset that *Naqoyqatsi* too is a critique on modernity.

After this introduction and the title sequence, *Naqoyqatsi* embarks on a virtual voyage. The atmosphere is electric and the music chimes excitedly as the voyage takes the viewer into the creation of modernity. A thousand numbers swim by in formulas and binary code as a whole new virtual universe is created. But all is not well, for soon the viewer is confronted by images of soldiers and armies. Then there is war, which at least results in new beginnings, but alas, more images of war are presented and the cycle repeats itself. The pattern of an endless, inescapable cycle of war emerges. According to Reggio (1992:401) the war is being waged on the 'force of life'. What he means by this is the way society confuses human freedom with the pursuit of technological 'happiness'. *Naqoyqatsi* is essentially about the death of nature, not only in an ecological sense, although that is included, but the death of nature as the host of life, as a place where life is lived, and its replacement with the synthetic world.

In decentering and disorienting montages of electronic and alien looking images that seem to segue endlessly, *Naqoyqatsi* progresses to depict scenes referring to a multitude of modern topics. In the area of posthumanism, issues of identity formation and dehumanisation as a result of the integration of humanity and technology are raised in scenes touching on the topics of cybernetics and cloning, where human bodies are objectified as machines and as areas for scientific experiment. Scenes of gambling, national patriotism, money, drugs, politics, celebrity and sport are shown in a chapter entitled *New religions*. The opium war waged by the spectacle of the mass media and the creation of a virtual, simulated and hyperreal environment of excess that annihilates the real are depicted in the manipulated and electronic images of 'natural' and synthetic

environments alike, mourning the loss of the natural and the real. A scene of an orbiting satellite beaming its signal down towards Earth evokes the sense that the satellite is actually firing a powerful weapon of mass destruction at the planet in a declaration of war. Issues of globalisation are presented in scenes of stock market trading floors and logos of global corporate conglomerates such as BP, McDonalds and Coca-Cola, which perpetuate a single, modernised world system. The impact of modernity on humanity is represented in scenes of aircraft crash test footage where the dummies agonisingly and painfully flail this way and that in slow-motion as well as in more subtle ways in the form of the computerisation of society, in scenes where hundreds of swirling computer icons are formed and superimposed over children playing in a park. The violence increases as news footage of riots and war and stock footage of nuclear explosions and the devastating effects of their shock waves are included. After this frantic and violent voyage, the pace suddenly slows down as slow-motion sequences and close-ups in the penultimate chapter show the faces of humanity in the form of different individuals from around the world, sometimes crying, sometimes aggressive or disaffected and sometimes just looking questioningly into the camera as if to simply ask, "Why?". This is followed by a scene of soldiers shouting out drill instructions but played in reverse, as if to take back all the violence and destruction that occurred in the film up to this point. The last chapter looks questioningly into the future, depicting scenes of awe-inspiring space shuttle launches and space exploration. Another scene shows a comet or meteorite entering the Earth's atmosphere, threatening human extinction with deep impact. This chapter is interspersed with sequences of thrill-seeking skydivers jumping out of airplanes while mesmerising the audience with aerial acrobatics as they fall to the ground to the accompaniment of Yo

Yo Ma's calm and intriguing cello solos. This perhaps embodies the notion that technology has taken humanity very high off the ground and, as this technological system shows its flaws and starts to collapse, humanity is tumbling back down to Earth. The only difference maybe is that while the skydivers are already strapped to parachutes, humanity is hoping to construct its parachutes as it falls.

In *Naqoyqatsi* all the images are manipulated in some way, creating an overall aesthetic that is alien, unnatural and separated from reality. This becomes the cinematic language and defamiliarisation device of the film, just as time-lapse is the main language for *Koyaanisqatsi* and slow-motion is the main language for *Powaqqatsi*. The world that the viewer is confronted with this time is a dehumanised, synthetic world of war. Instead of the pleasant experience of the beauty and spectacle of *Koyaanisqatsi* and the beauty and dignity of *Powaqqatsi*, the cinematic experience of *Naqoyqatsi* is unpleasant, uncomfortable and difficult to digest, the only refuge perhaps being the beautifully composed and executed music. Thus, the defamiliarisation device in *Naqoyqatsi* is this manipulation of the images that attempts to deconstruct modern metanarratives of progress.

This chapter has analysed the *Qatsi* trilogy using the postmodern framework constructed in the previous chapter by discussing the postmodern aspects demonstrated and reflected in the films. These aspects include its decentering nonnarrative style, its defamiliarisation devices, which help to deconstruct modern metanarratives, its critique of modernity, its reflection of the postmodern subject experience as a decentered and disorienting one, the

effects of the spectacle of technology and the mass media on the loss of the real, resulting in a general schizophrenic state, the homogenisation and dehumanisation caused by the high level of integration with technology and the devastating aspects of globalisation and modernisation on un-modernised societies. Conclusions drawn from the investigation and analysis above are clarified in the following chapter.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

This study is an attempt to analyse the *Qatsi* trilogy in terms of a postmodern framework. This seems an appropriate way to analyse the films because they grapple with contemporary modern life, as does postmodernism. Upon watching the films it is possible to detect many parallels to postmodernism and that tracing them and setting them out more rigorously will bring a greater understanding of the films.

Chapter two constructs the framework for postmodernism and foregrounds the specific postmodern aspects that have bearing on the trilogy. Because postmodernism encompasses such a wide range of issues, it limits the discussion to only those postmodern aspects relevant to the *Qatsi* films. However some postmodern aspects that do not have a direct application to the trilogy are included because they are necessary to establish a context for other postmodern issues. The chapter commences by investigating the etymology of the word 'postmodern' and its variants and by looking briefly at a number of definitions and descriptions of postmodernism by various theorists. It concludes that postmodernism is still a confusing and amorphous term, some even denying that it has any relevance at all. Among the multitude of definitions, Ward's definition is chosen for postmodernism because it encompasses postmodernism without being too general and the remainder of the chapter is structured loosely on this definition as it looks at the abstract issues of meaning, reality and identity. Following this, some important terms are clarified namely, modernism, modernity and modernisation, and modernity is established as a project that has become deeply problematic.

The progression from grand narratives or metanarratives to pluralism in postmodernism is investigated by firstly looking at the writings of Greenberg to understand the modernist tendency to formulate overarching theories that assume a legitimating power, in this case, the power to determine what is art and what is not. Subsequently, the theories of Lyotard demonstrate the deconstruction of the legitimating metanarratives, specifically those of the Western metanarratives of science and progress. Deconstructions such as these provide an explanation to some extent of the loss of faith and incredulity towards modern metanarratives and their delegitimation. Without the centering function of metanarratives, which provides a certain rhyme and reason for the random flow of experience in postmodern society, decentering and pluralism become aspects of postmodernism. In the theories of Foucault a pluralistic system for knowledge based on unstable structures, which accommodates differentiation is demonstrated. The manifestation of pluralism in art in the form of pastiche is investigated specifically looking at 'double coding' in architecture and the decentering qualities of pluralism that are demonstrated in films that adopt a nonnarrative style.

Further elaborating on the decentered nature of postmodernism the chapter investigates poststructuralism, which embraces the destabilisation of structure in the production of meaning and reality. Since poststructuralism's predecessor, structuralism, has also influenced postmodern thought, structuralism is studied by looking at the founding work of Saussure who emphasises the location of meaning in the relationships between signs as apposed to asserting that signs have intrinsic value, an anti-foundational trait. While structuralism believes in stable structures of meaning, poststructuralism has an even more

pronounced anti-foundational stance as it rejects the notion that stable structures support meaning. The work of a prominent philosopher in anti-foundationalism is explored in this regard, namely Nietzsche who argues that there are no facts based on solid foundations, only interpretations. Per implication the West has relied on underpinnings that are fundamentally flawed. The chapter progresses on to Derrida's concept of deconstruction, an anti-foundational philosophy that deconstructs the metaphysics of presence and the metanarratives based on them in Western philosophy. Deconstruction is linked to Shklovsky's 'defamiliarisation' showing that it deconstructs hidden assumed entities covered under the veil of the venerated familiar. The use of defamiliarisation devices in film, such as slow-motion and the close-up are examined, highlighting their deconstructive qualities.

Barthes' contention that structuralism cannot separate itself from the language it is working upon and therefore cannot be an objective legitimising meta-language is briefly investigated as well as the function of intertextuality in the production of meaning. The overabundance of signs in the postmodern environment is explored by looking at the theories of Wollen, who argues that signs are so ubiquitous that they are becoming modern society's primary reality. This is reiterated by Baudrillard who claims that the world is made up of an excess of signs, signifiers that point to other signifiers endlessly, without any signified, which leads to a hyperreality that replaces the real and so moves into an obscene, paradoxical state.

The last section of the chapter looks at the postmodern view on identity, which follows the poststructuralist tendency to see the subject as an unstable entity, always changing and inextricably intertwined in its culture and environment. The effects of a technological environment on modern society are explored by looking at the writings of McLuhan, who concludes that technology has extended the abilities of humans to such an extent that they can be seen as cyborgs. The extension of human awareness across the world has contributed to a globalisation, which the chapter investigates through the theories of Jameson, who explains that this globalisation has resulted in the disorientation of the postmodern subject who is unable to fathom the dispersed global networks. The further disorienting effects of the mass media are investigated by looking at Hughes, who claims that individuals' realities are perverted by the spectacle the mass media creates. This society of the spectacle is explored in the work of Debord, who points out further complications in the form of 'increased survival' and pseudo-needs, which modern society has become addicted to. The chapter then looks at Baudrillard's theories on the dehumanising commodification of society before exploring further works by Benjamin, who argues that this commodification and spectacle has led to a general schizophrenic condition in modern society. This is further elaborated by Marcuse who also points out that a drastic change of direction needs to be taken to avoid catastrophe.

Lastly, the chapter explores some of the main themes in postcolonialism through the work of Trinh. T. Minha such as the deconstruction of Western metanarratives, the deconstruction of binary opposites such as 'primitive/civilised', the complications implicit in the representation of peoples in 'opaque' texts, the dehumanisation of the

‘other’, the decentered approach of including many narratives or voices, hybridity, liminality, the destabilisation of boundaries and a general distrust of imposing modernisation onto un-modernised peoples.

The third chapter focuses on the *Qatsi* trilogy and applies the postmodern framework constructed in the second chapter to an analysis of the trilogy. It starts by investigating Reggio’s background as a member of the Christian Brothers order where it can be seen that he developed a distance from modernised society and a perspective conducive to the critique of modernity. The chapter also investigates what led Reggio to choose film as his medium of expression in that it is a medium that contemporary ‘image’ based society understands, which demonstrates the postmodern strategy of using the tools of modernity to deconstruct modernity.

The *Qatsi* trilogy as a whole is discussed showing the use of the Hopi language as a defamiliarisation device to deconstruct and undermine the Western metaphysic or worldview. The decentering nonnarrative style that Reggio employs is also explored as another defamiliarisation device that foregrounds image and sound as opposed to words, script, characterisation and plot of more conventional mainstream films, thereby destabilising the metanarratives of conventional film practice. Furthermore, the chapter points out that Reggio’s nonnarrative style is open to a postmodern multivalency as it encourages different experiences and interpretations, demonstrating the postmodern decentering and pluralistic effects of a nonnarrative style. The central theme in the trilogy is clarified, that of the transition of society from a natural environment as a host of life to

a technological or synthetic environment, introducing the postmodern concerns that grapple with contemporary living conditions and the aspects of a postmodern environment, which are discussed in more detail as the investigation continues.

Koyaanisqatsi, the first installment in the trilogy, is discussed as the critique of modernised cultures of the Northern hemisphere. From the title it can be deduced that *Koyaanisqatsi* proposes that modernity has created a mechanical system or environment that is in many ways unfit for human beings. As a result, an antagonistic relationship between the Western technological worldview and that of the 'more human' non-Western worldview has arisen, which is acknowledged in the film by the way in which it is framed. Time-lapse is investigated as a main cinematic language which demonstrates postmodern aspects such as the decentered and disorienting postmodern subject experience, the environment of simulation and hyperreality that destroys the real and the homogenisation and dehumanisation of society in a technological environment that has rendered individuals as cyborgs. *Koyaanisqatsi* reflects the spectacle, commodification and resulting general schizophrenic state of modern society in its content, which is central to postmodern themes. The parallel of Derrida's strategy to deconstruct Western philosophy with the tools of Western philosophy and Reggio's strategy to deconstruct modernised society with the tools of modernised society namely, technology, is also highlighted.

While *Koyaanisqatsi* approximates the cultures of the Northern hemisphere, the discussion on *Powaqqatsi* shows the film's portrayal of cultures in the Southern

hemisphere in transformation from a more traditional or ‘natural’ state to more industrial, modernised states. We see in the film that cultures in Peru, Brasil, Kenya, Egypt, Nepal and India, seduced by the mass media, are adopting the metanarratives of modernity. *Powaqqatsi* critiques the way globalisation and modernisation are imposed upon un-modernised cultures of the third world, thus aligning with postcolonial themes. The deconstruction of the binary opposite ‘civilised/primitive’ is discussed as well as the way in which the West fundamentally confuses simple living with poverty. The chapter discusses the way that the seduction of the spectacle lures people into accepting false needs as their own, causing them to enter into a situation of ‘increased survival’: an undesirable addictive situation that accompanies modernisation. The way *Powaqqatsi* favours a unity that is sustained through diversity in un-modernised societies is examined and contrasted to the way unity is achieved through homogenisation in industrialised societies. The chapter discusses how slow-motion and the close-up are applied as defamiliarisation devices to deconstruct ‘self/other’ and ‘civilised/primitive’ binary oppositions.

Whereas *Koyaanisqatsi* is about the North and *Powaqqatsi* is about the South, *Naqoyqatsi* is about the entire globe. Most of the images in *Naqoyqatsi* are sourced from archival footage and therefore the location is transferred from the real to the virtual. Through the juxtaposition of Bruegel’s painting of the tower of Babel and the abandoned modernist building, Michigan Central Train Station, we see that *Naqoyqatsi* views modernity as on a potentially catastrophic trajectory. By looking at the definition of the title the study shows that the film sees contemporary society as being engaged in a war

that goes beyond the obvious battlefield, as a sanctioned war waged in ordinary everyday life against nature as the host of life, the aim of which is to replace nature with a new synthetic host. This war is illustrated through the manipulation of the images, transforming them into artificial and alien likenesses of the now forgotten real. Other postmodern topics are mentioned such as identity formation and cyborgs, spectacle, simulation, the hyperreal, globalisation and the potentially cataclysmic failure of modern technology to sustain humanity.

From the above it is clear that the *Qatsi* trilogy reflects many postmodern aspects. To reiterate: the deconstruction of Western metanarratives (through the use of various defamiliarisation devices such as the strange titles, the nonnarrative film style, time-lapse, slow-motion and the manipulation of images), the resulting pluralisation and decentering effects (demonstrated by the nonnarrative film style and the content of the films), the postmodern social concerns that grapple with the contemporary technological environment (including simulation, hyperreality, the decentering and disorienting postmodern subject experience, cyborgation, commodification, spectacle and globalisation), the antagonistic relationship between Western and non-Western worldviews forming a strong postcolonial statement (including the deconstruction of binary opposites such as 'civilized/primitive', 'self/other' and dealing with issues around globalisation and increased survival) and the postmodern themes around identity (namely, cyborgation, the effects of globalisation, homogenisation, dehumanisation, commodification, pseudo-needs and schizophrenia).

However, there are some aspects that point to more modernist approaches. For example, an analysis such as the one described in this study exposes a quite solid and centering structure. Also, the existence of a centralised and unifying theme, namely the transition of society from natural to the synthetic environments, displays a modernist trait. And, one could say that Reggio's hope, mission and purpose does not fit in with more nihilistic postmodern views. However, on the whole the *Qatsi* trilogy can be seen to represent postmodern film.

Further areas of study could include the study of similar films such as *Baraka* (1992) and *Chronos* (1985), directed by Ron Fricke, which could provide further insight to this investigation. Moreover, the *Qatsi* trilogy, especially *Koyaanisqatsi*, has had a significant influence on filmmaking in that the city scenes and time-lapse photography have inundated the media, thus it could be fruitful to investigate the extent of this film's influence. Finally, this study has largely overlooked the spiritual aspects inherent within the movies. Reggio and Glass are both monks, Reggio a Catholic monk and Glass a Tibetan monk, thus the films are largely spiritually motivated. By exploring spiritual aspects, such as references to the Beast of the Apocalypse and the Hopi prophecies, and by relating them to postmodernism and the films, a more comprehensive understanding could be gained.

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