A semiotic analysis of selected South African female artists’
work from a feminist, post-colonial perspective

by

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DECLARATION BY CANDIDATE

“I hereby declare that the dissertation/thesis submitted for the degree M. Tech. Fine and Applied Arts, at the Tshwane University of Technology, is my own original work and has not previously been submitted to any other institution of higher education. I further declare that all sources cited or quoted are indicated and acknowledged by means of a comprehensive list of references.”

S. A. MARAIS
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Soli Deo gloria.
Dedicated to the memory of my mother, Gerra Esterhuizen.
ABSTRACT

The research aim of the study was to investigate the way that Nandipha Mntambo and Mary Sibande have used the female form in their art to undermine harmful representations/myths of women from a third wave feminist and a post-colonial perspective, using semiotics. One of my own artworks was analysed in order to ascertain if the above mentioned aspects could be identified in my artwork as well.

A literature study was undertaken of semiotics, feminism and post-colonialism to form the theoretical framework of the study. Semiotics can be used to establish how meaning is made and reality represented in signs. The impact of signs, codes, myths and ideology of society on the embodiment of the female was investigated using semiotics.

Third wave feminism theories can be applied in the analysis of the artworks such as Butler’s gender construction and Crash and Pruzinsky’s viewpoint on the harmful and stereotypical assumptions about women in visual culture. The post-feminist viewpoints as discussed by Jones about women being portrayed either as housewives and mothers or as sex and consumer objects in visual media were highlighted.

Post-colonial perspectives such as the dominant ideology of the colonial period fostering the creation of interrelated, socially constructed, controlling images of black womanhood were discussed. Racial and gender discrimination affected most black women in colonial times.
Through the semiotic analysis of Nandipha Mntambo and Mary Sibande, as well as my own artwork, an examination of the ideology of patriarchy as well as the ideology of colonialism could be identified. The artists express pride in their heritage and traditions. The ideology of consumerism and the myth of beauty are subverted by the artists in their artwork. The myth of the maid can be observed in the artworks of Sibande and myself. All the artists subvert stereotypical representations of women in society.

Keywords: semiotics, feminism, post-colonialism, hybridity, mimicry, consumerism, intertextuality, ideology, myth and difference.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Contemporary South African mass media images seem to express a post-feminist perspective. The point of departure of post-feminism is the view that women have already achieved equality. The post-feminist movement argues that women’s oppression belongs to a bygone era and that the women’s movement is merely an out-dated relic of that era. Post-feminist theorists state that women now enjoy equality in society and are in control of their lives. McRobbie (2004:258) states that in mass media, feminism is disempowered by views, such as, that feminism belongs to the past and it is considered by some to be out of date. These media images can often be seen as harmful representations, as it can be argued that South African women in particular have not yet achieved true equality.

In contemporary visual media, a superficial representation is often given of a woman’s role, identity and body. For example, one finds young, beautiful, idealised images of female beauty, focusing on physical beauty and sexual attractiveness. At the same time, there is the idea of a return to traditional female roles such as child bearing and housekeeping (Jones, 2003:317). Media theorist Jean Baudrillard (1998:136) states that the female body and beauty sell products in the mass media. This implies that women are represented in mass media as consumer objects. Pinson (1998:4) cites research supporting the opinion that the visual media within a certain patriarchal ideology produce myths that support that ideology. Women of the post-feminist movement might argue that they use their femininity to get their message across and that being perceived as consumer and sex objects do not harm them. McRobbie (2004:259) states that there seems to be
female consent to this portrayal of women and that young women appear to have an uncritical reaction to the commercially produced sexual representations of women in mass media.

Female equality in South Africa has come a long way since colonial times. With free democratic elections in 1994, a new constitution (Act 108:1996) came into being which intended to guarantee individual freedom and equality for all South African citizens. Women, as with all previously disadvantaged groups, have gained legal and political equality with men, with the same career opportunities and promotions. This can be seen in the increase in the number of female top executives, in the private and public sector (Bhaktawar, 2010:30). The primary struggle in South Africa (Thrope, 2012:57) was a racial struggle for many years. Despite this, great changes have been made towards equality for women in South Africa since the establishment of full democracy in 1994. The importance of the role of women in society is recognised by the government by implementing a national public holiday, called Women’s Day, which is commemorated each year on 9 August.

However, although there has been a great change in South African society, some remnants of the legacy of the colonial and apartheid eras remain regarding the way that, particularly black women’s roles, identity and bodies are perceived in society. Thrope (2012:61) quotes Nelson Mandela’s view of women’s position in society: “freedom cannot be achieved unless the women have been emancipated from all forms of oppression”. So it can be argued that feminism and in particular third wave feminism, which focuses on issues of gender as well as racial
difference (Tong, 2009:284) and critically examines the portrayal of women in the mass media (Walker, 1992:40), should still play a role in South Africa.

Apart from a third wave feminist perspective, a post-colonial point of view will also be adopted in this research. Young (1996:97) argues that black women are discriminated against for being black as well as being female. bell hooks (1996:84) argues that the black female body is mostly portrayed in mass media as a sexualised body without freedom of choice. As pointed out in post-colonial discourse, colonial and apartheid representations of black women have created certain harmful myths that have not yet fully been dispelled (Enwezor, 1997:24). This was an aspect of the false image of Africa and its people that was constructed during the colonial era. The colonial subject was portrayed as ‘the other’ to the coloniser who was seen as ‘the one’. Oguibi (1997:69) states that black women are often portrayed in visual media as abject, by dislocating their personalities and identities and representing them as objects, for example as maids. Gilkes (in Eze, 1998:348) states that the dominant ideology of the colonial era fostered the creation of socially constructed, controlling images of black womanhood. These images functioned in keeping black women in a subordinated position. Enwezor (1997:379) argues that in the post-apartheid era, racist stereotypes and myths about black people still exist and are difficult to eradicate. Although today these stereotypes are thought of as things of the past, in reality they remain perversely lodged in popular culture, films, novels and art (Enwezor, 1997:381). For example, Gilkes (in Eze, 1998:348) states that the dominant ideology of the slave era fostered the creation of four interrelated, socially constructed, controlling images of black womanhood, relevant particularly in the American context. These stereotypes include: the mammy, the matriarch, the
welfare mother and the Jezebel. Such images of black women in visual media maintain stereotypes regarding black women's bodies, roles and identities and support oppression.

By contrast (to mass media and colonial representations), certain contemporary South African visual artists have used the black female body in their art to undermine such harmful representations and myths. Oguibe (1997:65) states that since the 1980s, some South African female artists began to produce art that consciously focus on women and their contributions to culture and society; an art that located women in history and their struggle, as well as portraying them with dignity and respect. Mary Sibande’s work is a reflection of this notion. Sibande (Wiarda, 2011:2) attempts to critique the stereotypical depiction of women in our society. She questions and challenges assumptions regarding the position of black women. In her series of a domestic worker, Sophie, she delves into history and contemporary South African society. Another artist, Nandipha Mntambo (McIntosh, 2008:3), states that her work seeks to challenge and subvert pre-conceptions regarding the representation of the female body. She challenges male and female roles in our society and stereotyped associations of women with femininity, sexuality and vulnerability.

Semiotics can be used to analyse these artworks, in order to explicate the manner in which these images challenge certain myths and stereotypes. The semiotic analysis will be informed by feminist and post-colonial perspectives insofar as they enrich and explain the research argument. Semiotics is the study of signs, codes and meaning. The aim of semiotic analysis is to establish how meaning is made and reality is represented in signs (Eco, 1976:4), and it can be used to identify and
analyse ideologies and myths that are represented in visual images. In this study an attempt will be made to investigate the ways that selected female artists have used the black female body in their artworks to undermine and comment on harmful and stereotypical myths regarding black women in South African society. Selected artworks by the South African artists, Mary Sibande and Nandipha Mntambo and myself will be analysed from a third wave feminist and post-colonial perspective. The artworks will be analysed to determine which signs, codes and meanings can be derived. The aim is to examine how these artworks counter the mainstream mass media representation of black women, which has not sufficiently improved.

1.2 Literature review

1.2.1 Semiotics

Lobinger (2005:1) states that, in the twentieth century, the digitalisation of media technologies resulted in a rapid acceleration of visual information. Visual media have had an enormous impact on societies’ cultural practices and on how societies’ members meaningfully interpret and make sense of the world, and images have taken over the world as the primary source of information (Lobinger, 2005:2). Fuery and Mansfield (1997:88) argue that “the postmodern world is one of visuals, of complex, rapid and startling images that shape our consciousness, culture and ways of making sense of the world”. Daniel Chandler (2002:4) states that many contemporary cultural theorists have remarked on the growth of the importance of visual media compared with linguistic media in contemporary society. Visual culture is constructed in a specific culture and visual art is an important signifier of this cultural expression and identity (Van Eeden & Du Preez,
Paul Messaris (in Morgan, 2005:145) states that visuals are a prominent feature of the media landscape. Scott (in Morgan, 2005:150) argues that visuals have symbolic meaning and are constructed for a specific culture. The significance thereof for the purpose of the argument of this research is that the visual media in South Africa perpetuate the dominant ideology through certain myths, as is the case with each particular culture (Chandler, 2002:106). The way that women are seen in a society is portrayed in the visual culture of that society. By analysing the artworks of Mary Sibande, Nandipha Mntambo and myself the myths in these artworks will be identified.

Semiotics can be used to study visual culture. According to Chandler (2002:2) “semiotics is concerned with meaning-making and representation of signs in many forms. Signs take the form of words, images, sounds, gestures and objects”. Eco (1976:4) states that semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign.

Semiotics was developed by the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and the philosopher Charles Peirce (1838-1914) (Chandler, 2002:6).¹ Semiotics is defined by de Saussure as a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life. It is not purely a method of written analysis, but involves both the theory and analysis of signs and codes as well as representative practices (Chandler, 2002:259).

¹ The term, semiology, is sometimes used to refer to the study of signs by theorists within the Saussurean tradition (for example Barthes, Kristeva, Baudrillard and Levi-Strauss) (Chandler, 2002:6).
The work of Roland Barthes also played a significant role in making semiotics a recognised field of study, in applying it to popular culture and other non-linguistic fields. Barthes examined culture in terms of the production of myths and ideology. An ideology (Chandler, 2002:145) is a system of ideas and discourses which are related in some way to the interests of a social group. A dominant ideology is the set of roles and ideas that govern society in which most members of that society follow these rules. Myths (Chandler, 2002:144) are socially constructed truths that are supported by an ideological meaning and are often communicated through stereotypes. The methods of de Saussure, Barthes and Peirce, as applied by contemporary theorists like Judith Williams, Daniel Chandler and Stuart Hall, will primarily be used to analyse the selected visual images and myths.

Semiotics originally developed from structuralism. However, post-structuralism has also impacted on semiotics, through the work of Julia Kristeva and Jean Baudrillard, for example. Kristeva (1980:69) deals with intertextuality. She was well-known as a structuralist, but moved her focus to post-structuralism and has an important place in it. Her post-structuralist concept of intertextuality refers to various relations in form and subject matter which bind a text to other texts. Intertextuality can also involve internal relationships within a text (Chandler, 2002:251). Baudrillard is well known for the analysis of the modes of mediation

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2 Structuralism is a theoretical framework which can be used in the analysis of texts. Structuralism is concerned with an examination of the meaning-making structures of society (Chandler, 2002:233). Structuralists (Sim, 2011:387) believe that all phenomena are part of deep structures that dictate how these phenomena develop and argue that the world is organised in a series of interconnecting systems, each with its own syntax of operation.

3 Post-structuralists believe that difference, rather than similarity, is the defining characteristic of all phenomena. Post-structuralists (Sim, 2011:388) argue against theories that claim universal explanations of phenomena and reject the totalising theory of structuralism.
and technological communication. His writings are mostly concerned with the way technological progress affects social change and cover diverse subjects such as consumerism and gender relations (Simmons, 1982:9). Baudrillard broadens semiotic theory by saying that there is a new functioning of the sign. He states that the sign has three successive phases, namely; it is a reflection of a basic reality, it masks and perverts a basic reality, it masks the absence of a basic reality thus it bears no relation to any reality; it is its own simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1983:83). According to Baudrillard (1999:92), mass-mediated signs become the means by which social life in society is controlled. The relevance of his ideas for semiotics is that a ‘neo-real’ or ‘hyper-reality’ is created by the mass media, which displays codes of prescribed significations, for example the code of beauty (Baudrillard, 1999:93). Baudrillard (1998:129) states that the body and the representation of the body becomes a consumer object, thus a prescribed set of codes to which individuals in society must adhere in order to be viewed as beautiful, acceptable and successful.

The impact of signs, codes, myths and the ideologies of society on the embodiment of the female form will be investigated using semiotic analysis. Though the post-structuralist notions of Kristeva and Baudrillard will inform this study, the work of Jacques Derrida, (his ideas on deconstruction to some extent are derived from but exceed and in some ways supersede semiotics), will not be used, in order to limit the scope of this study.

To sum up, semiotics is concerned with meaning making. Semiotics involves identifying signs, codes, myths and ideology that can be identified in texts, and especially, for this study, visual images. In this study semiotics will be used to
analyse the meaning given to women, their embodiment, roles and identities in selected South African visual artworks.

1.2.2 Feminism

In this study a third wave feminist, post-colonial reading of the embodiment of the female form as seen in selected art works of Mary Sibande, Nandipha Mntambo and myself will be undertaken, informed by a semiotic analysis. The feminist movement is one of the most far-reaching movements in history (Broude & Garrard, 1994:12). It can be classified into four waves and generations (Stearman, 1993:33-45). For the purpose of this study the scope will be limited to the theory of the third wave feminist movement.

The third wave movement provides women the opportunity to define feminism for themselves from their own individual perspectives and belief systems. Third wave feminism pays attention to all aspects that seem to limit or oppress women. These feminists have also widened their scope of interest to other marginalised identities. This approach involves a poststructuralist interpretation of gender and sexuality and focuses on ‘micro-politics’, and diversity (Tong, 2009:284). These aspects are agreed upon by third wave feminist theorists like Elle Green, Carol Gilligan, Angela McRobbie and Judith Butler. The central issues of third wave feminism are those of race, class and sexuality. These theorists also want to draw attention to the apparently damaging images of women propagated by the visual media (Walker, 1992:40).

Certain third wave feminist notions are relevant to my analysis of the selected artworks. Judith Butler (2003:395) suggests that it becomes impossible to
separate gender from political and cultural influences. Her views on gender construction are relevant to this study. McRobbie (2004:256) mentions the binary opposition that exists between a woman’s role as housewife and her other roles outside her home, in society. This aspect is also relevant to the analysis of the artworks. McRobbie (2004:258) states that the media has become the key site for defining codes of sexual construction and that the media plays a role in the commercial portrayal of women as sex objects. McRobbie (2007:35) says that there is space in the third wave feminist movement for the voices of difference and other marginalised identities. In the analysis of the artworks this aspect, related to post-colonial concerns, will be given attention. Naomi Wolf (1991:83) and Rebecca Walker (1992:40) state that women are portrayed in a stereotypical way in the media. Mac (2012:1) states that criteria such as being slim, attractive and beautiful have been constructed for judging a woman’s success. In mass media women are portrayed as commodities with exchange value (Rivkin & Ryan, 1998:799). In this study this will be investigated in the analysis of the selected artworks.

The media seems to espouse a post-feminist view, in representing women in an objectifying, stereotypical and domesticated manner. Post-feminists argue that women have already achieved equality in society (McRobbie, 2004:259) and critique second and third wave feminism. It is the perspective of this researcher that post-feminism is not a viable strategy in the current South African context, where women have not been able to achieve the equality that would justify the adoption of post-feminism. It is my intention to demonstrate that the selected artworks by Mary Sibande, Nandipha Mntambo and myself serve as a necessary antidote to this perspective.
1.2.3 Post-Colonialism

From the 17th to the 19th century, large parts of Africa were colonised by European countries. In many cases people were oppressed and thereby lost their individual rights to freedom (Appiah, 2001:223). For the purpose of this study basic background information is provided for the colonial and post-colonial period in order to explain the possible impact of post-colonial discourse on the work of the selected artists.

Post-colonialism refers to the political status of independent former colonies of the European countries. It is the period after the former colony was granted independence from the colonising power and describes the forming of a new state with a new government. For Fanon (1986:161) the post-colonial period starts for the colonised with a ‘tabula rasa’, a blank first page, on which is inscribed the desire for a new identity and for independence from the colonised power. Post-colonialism is in part the struggle articulating the desire for historical and cultural emancipation. In this study the identity of particularly the black African woman will be investigated in the selected artworks using a post-colonial framework, because colonial and apartheid representations of black women have been based on negative stereotypes. The impact of post-colonialism on the work of the selected artists will only be dealt with insofar as it influenced their portrayal of the female body.

4 Colonialism is the practice in which a powerful country rules another country and establishes its own trade and culture in the territory (Longman, 2001:255). Mudimbe (1988:2) defines the process of colonisation as: “a territory that is totally reorganised and submitted to a Western model. He sees colonial imperialism as a calculated and inevitable culmination of capitalism. Colonisation is a domination of physical space, the reformation of the colonised’s minds and the integration of local economic histories into Western perspectives”. 
Post-colonial theory is an area that has developed largely as a result of the work of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayarti Spivak (Kennedy, 2000:115). Both Said and Spivak (Kennedy, 2000:125) are concerned with the ‘epistemic violence’ that imperialism inflicted on colonised countries, especially in relation to the issue of the representation of the colonised peoples. Masolo (1994:127) points out that Africans were identified as a ‘subhuman race’ and were presented as a ‘savage’ and ‘primitive’ people. Kebede (2004:20) states that through Western domination and Western ideology other cultures emerge as creations or representations of Western cultures. These representations take the West as a model. Mudimbe (1988:XV) argues that it is a Western formulation of ‘otherness’ that fully maintains the binary opposition between European and African. This authorises a view of non-Western people as primitive and savage. In this study this binary opposition will be analysed in the selected artworks, using semiotics.

The post-colonial terms hybridity and mimicry, will be used in the semiotic analysis of the artworks. By means of hybridity the replication of the binary oppositions of the colonial past can be avoided and new modes of cultural exchange and growth can be developed (Bhabha, 1994:262). The term hybridity describes an encounter between two different cultural groups where each has an influence and impact on the other, forming new cultural sites. Colonial mimicry is, according to Bhabha (1994:86), the desire to create a transformed, identifiable other as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite. With the process of mimicry, the colonised takes on the appearance of the colonial power by mimicking social and cultural roles of conduct, as well as speaking the coloniser’s language.
1.3 Artists

In this study selected art works of two black South African female artists, Mary Sibande and Nandipha Mntambo, will be analysed using semiotics, in dealing with black female identity. I will discuss my own work in the same manner. I will argue that the art of Sibande and Mntambo questions representations of black womanhood perpetuated by the mass media, while my own work examines my dual roles as housewife-wife and independent individual.

1.3.1 Mary Sibande

Figure 1-1: Mary Sibande, Sophie: *I put a spell on me* (digital print on cotton rag matte paper), 2008, 90cm x 60cm. (Artthrob, www.artthrob.co.za/artists/Mary-Sibande.aspx [Accessed: 16/04/2012])
Mary Sibande’s work (Wiarda, 2011:1) investigates living in a country damaged by apartheid and examines the influence of South Africa’s colonial past. She explores the creation of female identity and pays attention to female embodiment. The stereotypical representation of the black woman in our society is criticised and reviewed in her artwork (figure 1.1).

1.3.2 Nandipha Mntambo

Figure 1-2: Nandipha Mntambo, *Europa* (archival ink on cotton rag paper), 2008, 112cm x 112cm, Edition of 5 + 2 AP, Gordon Schachat Collection, private collections. (www.stevenson.info [Accessed: 28/08/2012])
Nandipha Mntambo (McIntosh, 2008:2) has become well known for her sculptures, videos and photographs that focus on the black female body and identity and use natural, organic materials (figure 1.2).

1.4 Method of study

A literature review will be undertaken to provide an overview of the main characteristics of the third wave feminist and post-colonial discourses, in order to construct a theoretical framework. This theoretical framework will, in turn, support a semiotic analysis of the artworks. The theoretical framework will be used to analyse selected artworks in South African visual culture in order to ascertain whether the images can be read from a third wave feminist and post-colonial perspective. Principles of semiotic theory will be applied in the analysing of the selected visual images in order to identify and decode which signs, codes and myths reflect a third wave feminist and post-colonial viewpoint.

1.5 Outline and purpose of chapters

The outline and purpose of the chapters are as follows:

- Chapter 1: Introduction (background, purpose of study, methods)
- Chapter 2: Literature survey and theoretical framework
- Chapter 3: Analysis and discussion of selected artworks of two South African artists and of my own work.
- Chapter 4: Discussion of research findings. Results of research. Conclusion of study and recommendations.
CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the literature review of semiotics, post-colonialism and third wave feminism that will form a theoretical framework to be used in the analysis of the works of Sibande and Mntambo and my own art work.

2.2 Literature review

2.2.1 Semiotics

Semiotic analysis can be used to establish how meaning is made and reality is represented in signs. Semiotics is the study of signs as part of social life. Applying semiotics to the phenomena of visual culture offers a means to analyse signs (Lobinger, 2005:4). These signs (visual images) offer views of the world in visual terms and interpret the world from a specific cultural and social background (Lobinger, 2005:4). The visual media has an impact on the cultural practices of society and how societies’ members interpret and make sense of the world (Hall, 1997:2).

Ferdinand de Saussure (Chandler, 2002:233), a Swiss structuralist, is mainly concerned with how signs operate in language. De Saussure (1983:66) offers a two-part model of the sign.\(^5\) Focusing on linguistic signs, he defines a sign as being composed of a ‘signifier’ and a ‘signified’. The signifier is the form that the

\(^5\) A sign (Ward, 1997:68) is the smallest unit of meaning in communication of any kind. A combination of signs which conveys meaning consists of a collection of individual signs that are put together in a certain way to produce a certain meaning. Examples are dress codes and social codes.
sign takes (for example a written or spoken word) and the signified is the concept to which it refers. De Saussure’s theories constitute a starting point for the development of various structuralist methodologies for analysing texts and social practices.

Codes organise signs into meaningful systems which connect signifiers and signifieds (Chandler, 2002:147). Codes comprise a collection of individual signs that are put together in a certain way to produce a certain meaning. Chandler (2002:148) identifies three different types of codes; social codes (behavioural, body and commodity codes), textual codes (scientific, aesthetic and mass media codes) and interpretative codes (visual perception and ideological codes). All codes can be seen as ideological. Codes have a specific meaning to members of a certain cultural group. Through these codes the rules and conventions of a certain culture are confirmed (Chandler, 2002:148).

The link between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary; the link between them is random, unplanned, unpredictable and uncertain and not intrinsic or essential (Chandler, 2002:250). The De Saussurean legacy of the arbitrariness of signs leads semioticians to stress that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is dependent on social and cultural conventions which have to be learned (Chandler, 2002:31). De Saussure (1983:121) emphasised that meaning arises from the differences between signifiers, these differences are syntagmatic and paradigmatic. Syntagms and paradigms provide a structural framework within which signs are organised into codes (Chandler, 2002:80). A paradigm is a set of associated signifiers or signifieds, which are all members of some defining group, but where each is notably different. Structurally, in a given context, each signifier
in the paradigm set can be replaced by another. The choice of one excludes the choice of another (Chandler, 2002:256). Paradigmatic analysis can be applied to popular culture. With paradigmatic analysis the positive and negative meanings of each signifier and the presence of fundamental thematic paradigms such as binary oppositions are considered (Chandler, 2002:256). According to Chandler (2002:246) the commutation test is "a structuralist analytical technique used in the paradigmatic analysis of a text to determine whether a change on the level of the signifier leads to a change on the level of the signified". This form of analysis can be applied in this study to identify binary opposites from a post-colonial and post-feminist perspective.

A syntagm is an organised collection of interacting signifiers which forms an evocative whole (Chandler, 2002:262). Chandler (2002:263) states that syntagmatic relations are the various ways in which fundamental elements within the same text may be basically related to each other. These can be either sequential (for example film and television narrative sequences), or spatial (for example paintings or photographs).

Charles Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure are widely regarded as the co-founders of semiotics (Chandler, 2002:6). Peirce identifies three models by which signs can be organised (Chandler, 2002:37), namely iconic, symbolic and indexical signs.

- Iconic signs refer to an approach in which the signifier is perceived as resembling or imitating the signified, and possessing some of its qualities for example; a portrait, a scale-model, metaphors and photographs.
Symbolic signs (Chandler, 2002:262) refer to signs in which the signifier does not resemble the signified. The symbolic sign is random or essentially conventional. Symbolic signs are signs in which the signifier is not similar to the signified but where the relationship is fundamentally arbitrary. The relationship must be learned, for example language, phrases and numbers (Chandler, 2002:6).

The indexical is a mode in which the signifier is not arbitrary but is directly related in some way to the signified. This can be observed as natural signs (such as weather), medical symptoms, measuring instruments, signals, recordings, personal trademarks and indexical words. In an indexical phase the signifier and the referent are regarded as directly connected.

Charles Levi-Strauss (Chandler, 2002:231) applied de Saussure’s method to the field of anthropology, and was the first person to apply this method to another field of study (apart from linguistics). Levi-Strauss (1979:12) argues that certain key binary oppositions are shared by all humans, cutting across cultural distinctions. Binary oppositions form the basis of fundamental organisational systems within a culture and are expressed in the form of paired opposites (Chandler, 2002:102). Levi-Strauss believes that each culture constructs meaning by means of binary oppositions.

Semiotics became well known in the 1960s partly as a result of the work of Roland Barthes, who became famous for his ideologically inflected semiotic analysis of images, texts and the myths of popular culture (Chandler, 2002:229). Barthes (1977:36) writes that the viewer of the message receives at one and the same
Barthes (in Chandler, 2002:165) continues that the reading of a visual message depends closely on the reader’s culture, knowledge of the world and ethical and ideological stances. He goes on to say that visual messages, like photographs, serve an ideological function, reflecting the culture where they originated. The reader must take into account the actual physical message, as well as its cultural meaning. Barthes (1977:38) identifies three levels of signification:

- The first order; that of denotation is the exact (dictionary) meaning of the text.
- The second order; that of connotation is the exact meaning, but also includes the emotive, imaginary and interpretative meaning of the text.
- The third order; that of ideology/myth is the culturally created meaning, created for a certain society.

Scott (1994:252) argues that visuals are not merely a reference to visual perception, but illustrative products created from the conventions of a particular culture. According to Scott (1994:252) all social texts are reinforced by a particular ideology. A dominant ideology is the set of rules and ideas that governs society and most members of that society will follow these guidelines. Thus it can be argued that ideology is determined by society (Barthes, 1990:131). An individual can never be outside his or her own ideology.

For Barthes (1990:132), ideology appears in the form of myths. Chandler (2002:144) refers to myths as socially constructed truths that are supported by an ideological meaning. Myths are often communicated through stereotypes whereby
mythical meaning is attached to the idea by society. Semiotics can be used to uncover hidden ideologies in a given visual text, by identifying myths.

Furthermore, semiotics often involves identifying figurative language, like metonyms and metaphors, thus metaphors can be identified in visual texts using semiotic analysis. Chandler (2002:127) states that “a metaphor consists of a precise primary subject that is expressed in terms of a rhetorical secondary subject”. Lakoff and Johnson (in Chandler, 2002:129) argue that dominant metaphors tend both to reflect and influence values in a culture or subculture.

A metonym (Chandler, 2002:131) is an object that refers to another object which is not described. It is a relationship based on a replacement that ensures that the signified is understood as a non-representational meaning. This allows for the meaning to become more substantial and clear. As in metonymy, irony can be used in semiotics to analyse visual images. In semiotic analysis it can assist in identifying binary opposites which are key to the understanding of the reading of a text. Irony (Chandler, 2002:134) is usually the opposite of what it actually means, from a certain association of the viewer to that of the conceptual connotation.

As previously stated, semiotics developed out of structuralism. According to structuralism, all meaning and social relations can be understood in terms of elements linked in fixed and controlled symbolic structures. Structuralism is only interested in the design of the structure itself, thus only the isolated text (Chandler, 2002:233). The author, the context, the reader and the history of the text are not of importance (Chandler, 2002:196). Post-structuralists believe that a text has no single meaning; it is an endless chain of signifiers, which each create new and
individual meaning for the text. This aspect is of importance for this study, because a post-structuralist approach focuses on the possibility of different meanings of the text. Structuralists emphasise similarity and inter-connectiveness and post-structuralists emphasise difference and open-endedness (Sim, 2011:287).

With Barthes (Sim, 2011:IX) semiotics started to some extent to exceed structuralist insights and move toward post-structuralism. Barthes (1977:39) refers to non-linguistic signs as being open to interpretation. Non-linguistic signs can be compared to a ‘floating chain of signifiers’. A floating signifier is a signifier with a vague, highly variable, and unspecifiable or non-existent signified. Such signifiers mean different things to different people and may mean whatever their interpreters want them to mean (Barthes 1977:146).

Julia Kristeva, the French philosopher and semiotician (1980:69), states that a text is not a unique creation but is the assimilation and alteration of another text. Kristeva (1980:69) introduced the term, intertextuality. Kristeva states that intertextuality refers to the various links in form and content which bind a text to other texts. It can also involve internal relations within a text (1980:70). With intertextuality, the meaning of the text can be endless and the limits of interpretation are set only by the limitations of the reader’s imagination. Kristeva (1980:66) claims that every text takes the shape of a medley of citations and that every text is the incorporation and alteration of other texts.

Jean Baudrillard (1983:5) argues that postmodern society is organised around simulation and the play of images and signs. Mass media simulates experiences as ‘real’ or ‘truthful’, although the reader has not experienced them himself/herself.
It is a simulated ecosphere where production means the production of images and not the production of real objects (Sim, 2011:296). Signs hide the absence of reality. Baudrillard (1983:6) calls such representations ‘simulacra’ or copies without originals.

Baudrillard (Chandler, 2002:77) identifies four successive (sequential) phases of the image as follows; the image is the reflection of a basic reality, the image masks and perverts a basic reality, the image masks the absence of a basic reality and the image bears no relation to any reality whatsoever and is its own pure simulacrum. Baudrillard argues that in medieval times the image was a direct reflection of reality. During the renaissance, images were the original and creative works of an artist. With the industrial revolution, a new era dawned that made the manufacturing of endless copies of the artwork possible. Photographic technology is an example where there is no original of a photographic image, although it refers to an external reality. Modern society is organised around the production and consumption of commodities, while post-modern society is organised around endlessly self-referencing images or simulacra, an era of hyper reality in which signs stand only for themselves (Sim, 2011:68). Baudrillard (Chandler, 2002:77) states that signs come in three forms; counterfeit (imitation), production (illusion) and simulation (fake). His ideas make one aware of the fact that, in modern society, one’s knowledge of the world is indirect and knowledge is primarily presented to us by the mass media. These representations are not identical copies of what they represent, but are constitutive of reality (Chandler, 2002:78).

Baudrillard (1998:129) refers to the omnipresence of the female body in visual media, where the female body sells products and becomes an object for
consumption. Baudrillard (1998:129) states that “the finest consumer object is the body”. In the visual media there is an obsession with the image of the female body and thus the body is linked to a simulacrum because it does not represent reality and does not represent the original model anymore (Sim, 2011:216). There is an obsession with youth and beauty and the body.

Visual texts differ from verbal texts, in that they are communicated across cultural codes while also carrying culturally specific meanings (Pinson, 1998:4). The dominant cultural and ideological values of society, for example the consumerist ideology, are represented in the media often through visual texts (Baudrillard, 1999:93). The dominant ideology is a representation of reality which offers individuals certain ideological values which govern and influence an individual’s everyday life in society (Chandler, 2002:181). Lobinger (2005:2) states that the mass media has a great influence on societies’ cultural practices and on how societies’ members interpret and make sense of the world. Scott (1994:252) argues that visuals are not merely a reference to visual perception, but illustrative products created from the conventions of a particular culture.

Thus far, this chapter provides a brief overview of semiotics. Semiotics is a reminder not to take representations for granted as reflections of reality. Using semiotic analysis, these representations can be taken apart and investigated.

2.2.2 Aspects of feminist discourse

Feminist theory is a discourse that examines sex and gender roles. The feminist movements can be classified into three waves and generations (Stearman, 1993:33-45).
The first wave feminist movement (Broude & Garrad, 1994:12) refers to a period of feminist activity during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, particularly in Britain and the United States of America. It focused on the officially authorised inequalities, primarily on gaining women’s suffrage. The first wave feminist movement’s aim was to use the legal system and legislation to overcome institutionalised political, legal and economic discrimination against women.

The second wave started during the 1960s and continued into the early 1970s. It was called the ‘women’s liberation’ movement in the popular media. Betty Friedman’s *The feminine mystique* and Simone de Beauvoir’s *The second sex* (Bashevkin, 1998:20) became popular in North America and Western Europe. Second wave feminists argue that women are seen as the ‘other’ and are forced by tradition and education to occupy an inferior place in society (Stearman, 1993:34). Patriarchy is seen as the primary form of oppression of women. These feminists argued that women suffer both personal and political oppression in a male-dominated society. Furthermore, fighting women’s oppression requires profound adjustment of prevailing economic, social and political structures. A renewed wave of feminism since the 1960s is a response to the fact that economic and political reforms that were achieved by the nineteenth century campaigners did not really alter the deep structures of sexual divisions in society or shift the ideological and psychological structures that sustained them (Pollock, 1996:6).

The third wave movement (Tong, 2009:284) began in the early 1990s, arising as a response to the supposed failures of the second wave movement. It was a reaction against the backlash concerning initiatives and movements created by the second wave. Third wave feminists claim that this movement allows women to
define feminism for themselves. Women can achieve this by incorporating their own identities into the general belief system of society. This can be attained by looking at one’s own femininity from one’s own perspective, ignoring preconceived ideas held by society. Baumgardner and Richards (2000:6) state that being liberated means finding one’s own way. Third wave feminism deals with issues that seem to limit or oppress women, as well as other marginalised identities, for example gay and lesbian communities, as well as women from developing countries where there is a history of colonial rule and racist oppression. The third wave movement challenges the second wave movement’s essentialist definitions of femininity. It is a post-structuralist interpretation (Tong, 2009:284) of gender and sexuality.

Third wave feminist Elle Green (in Johnson, 2002:182) often focuses on ‘micro politics’ and challenges the second wave’s paradigm, for example the second wave movement’s focus on a universal female identity, while actually representing mainly upper middle class white women. Supporters of the third wave feminist movement disagree with the idea that there is a universal basis for feminism and recognise that women from, for example, from developing countries have different experiences from women from first world countries. Carol Gilligan’s *In a different voice*, 1982, (in Faludi, 1992:362) a widely quoted and influential feminist work, focuses on women’s difference, a notion third wave feminists advocate. McRobbie (2007:35) says voices of difference as well as other marginalised identities have a place in this movement. Butler (1997:279) questions the argument that the oppression of women can be seen as a singular entity, discernible in the universal hegemonic structure of patriarchy or masculine domination. Third wave feminists such as Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards (2000:5) believe that women do
not share a uniform social identity worldwide, but that male domination still affects all women in some way or other.

The central issues of third wave feminists are those of race, social class and sexuality. They want to draw attention to allegedly harmful depictions of women in the media; for example the glamorisation of very slim models, the focus on youth, and the portrayal of women as sexualised objects and anti-intellectual (Walker, 1992:40). Wolf (1991:83) agrees with this perspective that women are portrayed in visual culture in a stereotypical manner that does not give a balanced representation of women’s different roles. These stereotypical assumptions about physically attractive women in the media can also be subverted to form negative stereotypes about a person, according to Crash and Pruzinsky (1990:6).

Third wave feminism (Pollock, 1996:6) focuses on aspects of femininity in relation to the politics of the female body, not only as a physical entity, but also as a culturally and socially created image. These aspects of female embodiment are discussed by the following theorists: Elle Green (Johnson, 2002:182), Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards (2000:5), Naomi Wolf (1991:83), Rebecca Walker (1992:40) and Thomas Crush and Thomas Pruzinsky (1990:6). They agree that the body is a creation, a symbol, a place where the pattern of sexual difference is written. Judith Butler (1997:274) also gives a feminist, seminal view of the embodiment of the female and states that gender roles are constructed by society.

By contrast, post-feminists argue that women have already achieved equality in society (McRobbie, 2004:259). There is no clear definition of post-feminism; it is a
flexible ideology and a critique against second and third wave feminism. According to Robinson (2001:498) it is a rejection of feminism; she states: “Hairy legs haunt the feminist movement, feminine clothing is back, breasts are back.” The impression is given that the feminist movement is supported by women who do not care for their physical appearance and their femininity, such as a few radical, left wing, unattractive females. In the mass media, a post-feminist perspective is promoted in images of women that focus on physical beauty and a fashionable appearance (Jones, 2003:315). The post-feminist movement argues that women’s oppression belongs to a bygone era and that the women’s movement is merely an out-dated relic of that era. It furthermore suggests that the women’s movement of the 1960s has gone too far and must be reined in (Faludi, 1992:81). Post-feminist theorists argue that women now enjoy equality in society and are in control of their lives (McRobbie, 2004:263).

The cultural space for post-feminism in the field of popular gender debate is that of ‘distance from feminism’. The mass media has become the key site for defining codes of sexual conduct. Across these many channels of communication, feminism is routinely disparaged. McRobbie (2004:258) states that one strategy in the disempowering of feminism includes it being historicised and generalised and thus easily rendered out of date. Faludi (1992:100) agrees that there is a negative attitude towards feminism in society as well in the media. The focus in mass media is on consumers and is aimed at women as consumers. Women are often portrayed as wealthy, narcissistic, superficial and materialistic in the mass media, for example spending all their time shopping. Coward (1997:361) states that women appear to have accepted the increasing sexualisation of their world and argues that women seem to buy into these myths of sexual desirability as if sexual
power is the only power they can wield. Supporters of this movement believe in
the notion of girl power and that a woman is in control of her own body, her own
life and her own destiny.

Faludi espouses the third wave feminist notion that feminism has not yet achieved
its aims, because women have not yet reached their full potential in society. Faludi
(1992:100-101) criticises the post-feminist perspective that is given in the media.
According to her, during the mid-seventies, the mass media started to promote the
idea that women had already achieved equality in all spheres of society. The
misleading idea is created in the media that women want self-gratification rather
than self-determination. Faludi states that suddenly in the early 1980s, media
started a campaign that suggested that feminism was ‘dead’ and that the women’s
movement was over. Jones (2003:316) cites The times (Fall, 1990) and Women’s
day (30 October 1990) as examples of this notion in the media. In popular media
the image of feminists was falsely given as women who ‘let themselves go
physically’ (Faludi, 1992:101) and had ‘no sense of style’. Faludi (1992:91) refers
to this notion as the ‘media and the backlash’.

As mentioned, the media portray women in a manner seemingly justified by the
post-feminist view, as can be seen by the resuscitation of patriarchal values
regarding women’s roles such as caregiving, childrearing and being a housewife
(Jones, 2003:323). The professional, empowered female is mostly ignored in the
popular media (Jones, 2003:321). The popular adoption of post-feminism,
including stereotypical representations of women in visual media continues, but
simultaneously embodies and reinforces the patriarchal meanings given to
feminine sexuality (Fiske, 1990:175).
Buckley (Barnard, 2001:100) claims that, in society, women’s primary role is seen in domestic service to husband, children and home. This assumption leads to a stereotypical view of women, which has an impact on the way that the roles of men and women are defined in society. South African researchers Louise Viljoen and Stella Viljoen (2005:90) focus on the construction of normative femininity in the Afrikaans magazine *Huisgenoot* and argue that women’s roles are prescribed by a patriarchal society. Van Eeden and du Preez (2005:2) have done extensive research on South African visual culture and concluded that its visual culture is informed by ideological concerns. They state that the politics of race and class identities are interwoven in South African visual media. South African visual culture (Van Eeden & Du Preez, 2005:7) continues to deal with the legacy of the colonial period and apartheid.

There is an omnipresence of the female body in visual culture, with a particular obsession with youth, elegance and femininity (Van Eeden & Du Preez, 2005:18-19). The representation of the body as capital and as a consumer object characterises the visual media. In consumer society the female body and beauty sell products (Baudrillard, 1998:136), for example beautiful models pose next to exclusive cars in advertisements. The body is the controlling myth of an ethic of consumption (Baudrillard, 1998:136). In visual media there is a narcissistic investment in the body. The perfect body is treated as an investment and a status symbol (Baudrillard, 1998:139,141). Ideas such as fitness, slimness, youth and obsession with grooming and fashion are reflected in the mass media. The notion of the perfect body and the perfect look is promoted. Individuals are judged by their physical appearance and the way that they dress in modern consumer
society. Sexuality is at the forefront of consumer society, over-determining the entire signifying field of visual communication (Baudrillard, 1998:143).

Butler (2003:394-396) argues in favour of the constructivist theory that the construction of an individual’s gender is influenced culturally and socially. She states that the performance of gender is constructed by the repetition of certain gender roles over a period of time. She distances herself from the essentialist view that there are innate and essential differences between men and women, and argues that the category of gender is regulated by society and functions to enforce compulsory heterosexuality. Butler (2003:394) states that society forces gender roles on individuals by means of a process of gender role playing from early childhood into adulthood. There are social consequences for a woman who deviates from the expected and acceptable social roles for women.

From a feminist perspective, women may use mimicry in order to give an impression of conforming to the approved female gender roles of society, by playing (miming) the approved stereotypes of the expected gender roles for women. With masquerade women may adopt culturally determined images passively and unconsciously. In contrast, with mimicry women can take culturally determined images ironically, controlling them from an internal critical distance. Irigary (1997:312) identifies with the latter type, although she believes women are manipulated by society. Mimicry is a potentially playful identity and female mimicry is an intentional manipulation of a particular gender act. The excessive portrayal of signifiers of femininity becomes a sort of female mimicry.

Tyler (2003:23) defines mimicry as follows:
Feminist critics have argued that mimicry is often a subversive practice, a time-honoured tactic among oppressed groups, who often appear to acquiesce in the oppressor’s ideas about it, thus producing a double meaning: the same language or act simultaneously confirms the oppressor’s stereotypes of the oppressed and offers a dissenting and empowering view for those in the know.

Furthermore, Tyler (2003:26) points out that:

…miming the feminine, playfully repeating it, produces knowledge about it: notably that it is a role and not a nature, and an exploitative role at that…The mimic as performance artist denaturalises ideology by questioning the terms in which she is produced and circulated as commodity, calling attention to the conventions that encode her as woman, representing representation and so unmasking through a conscious masking [mimicry] the masquerade of [woman’s] nature, as what precedes cultural construction. She ‘does’ ideology in order to undo it.

Wolf (1991:1) states that women appear to have accepted the increasing sexualisation of their world as an inevitable part of being female. She suggests that women are participating in a hopeless quest to attain the ideal standard of beauty which is set by the visual media. Crash and Pruzinsky (1990:53) talk about the existence of the ‘what is beautiful is good’ and ‘what is ugly is bad’ stereotype. It can also be argued that ‘what is beautiful is self-centred’ and ‘what is beautiful is sex-typed’ (Crash & Pruzinsky, 1990:51). These arguments reflect just how powerful the influence of the visual media is on women’s perceptions of themselves. Because of the popular adoption of post-feminism, stereotypical representations of women in visual media continue, and simultaneously embody and reinforce the patriarchal control of feminine sexuality (Fiske 1990:175), as patriarchy appears to be in control of the media (Jones, 2003:316). As mentioned earlier, Buckley (in Barnard, 2001:100) claims that, in society, women’s primary role is seen in domestic service to her husband, children and home. This assumption leads to a stereotypical view of women. This has an impact on the way in which the roles of men and women are defined in society.
In contemporary society there is also a culture of celebrity and self-obsession (Baudrillard, 1998:129). Role models for girls are actresses, models and rock and pop stars such as Madonna and Miley Cyrus. There is a focus on appearance, physical and superficial beauty. Young women are portrayed as sex objects in the visual media, for example in advertisements, music videos, computer games, films and on television. However, it may be that these women of the post-feminist movement use their femininity to get their message across and may see themselves as strong, powerful women who are comfortable with their bodies and sexuality (McRobbie, 2004:261).

Mulvey (2003:45) says that a woman stands in patriarchal culture as subordinate to men and their desires. Irigary (1985:170) similarly argues that a women’s position is determined through patriarchy. In post-feminist theory (Jones, 2003:315), there is a co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life as well as modern, contemporary view of the professional, independent career woman.

In this study the third wave feminist ideas about gender construction, difference, the traditional roles of femininity, stereotypical images of womanhood such as in the mass media and mimicry will be taken in account in the analysis of the selected artworks. The way that society views women and their roles, plays an important part in the way women see themselves as individuals. Specific third wave ideas that can be applied in the analysis of artworks are the following; Judith Butler’s (2003:394) opinion on gender construction, the views of Naomi Wolf (1991:83), Rebecca Walker (1992:40) and Thomas Crush and Thomas Pruzinsky (1990:6) on the harmful and stereotypical assumptions about women in visual
culture (for example women should be passive and fulfil certain preconceived gender roles that are expected by society; such as being a housewife, caregiver and the raising of children) and Angela McRobbie’s (2004:256) view on voices of difference in the third wave feminist movement.

There are myths regarding woman’s role as wife, mother and housekeeper represented in the media. This study will explore whether these myths of a woman as wife, mother and caregiver in the domestic environment, as well as woman as a stereotyped sex object, where only her physical appearance as being sexually attractive is focused on, can be identified in the artworks that will be analysed and whether such myths are in fact subverted.

2.2.3 Post-Colonialism

From the 17th to the 19th centuries, large parts of Africa were colonised by European countries in a period characterised by imperialism, whereby European countries were in competition with each other. The aim was to gain control of geographical areas in order to expand their territories, gain the mineral and agricultural riches of that country and utilise the indigenous people as cheap labour. In many cases people were enslaved and thereby lost their individual rights to freedom (Appiah, 2001:223).

The post-colonial period is, in part, the expression of the desire for historical and cultural emancipation. Fanon (1986:163) describes it as a new ethics insisting on equality and on taking responsibility for the transformation to the new state of freedom. In post-colonial society a new state and nation emerge where the past colonial state no longer exists and a new future awaits the people of the land.
Bhabha (1994:219) remarks about post-colonial society that:

New Post-colonial society [is one] where difference is neither One nor the Other, but something else besides, in-between – a future where the past is not originary, where the present is not simply transitory. An interstitial future, that emerges in-between the claims of the past and the needs of the present.

Frantz Fanon is seen as the founding father of post-colonial theory; he deals with the psychology of racism, the search for an African identity, discrimination, stereotyping and disorientation due to racism, and the effects of racist cultures (Bhabha, 1994:40).

Fanon (1986:160) states that the colonisers used race to justify the exploitation of the colonised. Race was used as a basis for exclusion and abuse. Africans became identified as the ‘other’, to the Europeans, who saw themselves as the ‘one’. The demand of identification for an ‘other’ entails the representation of the subject in a discriminating order of otherness. The real ‘other’ for the white person is and will continue to be the black person. Fanon (1986:161) claims that the black person has no other self than ‘his/her self-as-othered’. Fanon (1986:162) explains further that concepts such as race are created by ideology. The black body must be re-coded by representing the black body in a new, different manner, thus a new ‘corporal schema’ (body image) must be produced (Fanon, 1986:162). Race is itself a myth. It is a social construct that was developed in order to justify the economic exploitation of the colonised (Kebede, 2004:51).

Kebede (2004:20) claims that because of Western dominance and Western ideology, other cultures emerge as creations or representations of the Western paradigm. These representations take the West as a model. The result is that local cultures are marginalised and depicted as inferior, which authorises a view of non-
Western people as primitive and savage, because Western culture is taken as a universal yardstick (Kebede, 2004:19).

Kebede (2004:xii) argues that the African mind must be decolonised and that by rethinking philosophical concepts in the direction of deconstruction, mental decolonisation can be achieved. Loomba (2005: 79) agrees with this notion and states that it is a process of decolonisation and recovering of the identity and viewpoint of the colonised subjects from a post-colonial perspective. Kebede (2004:121) states that since colonial interpretation deforms the African past, Africa’s history must be rewritten from Africa’s perspective and philosophical viewpoint. Kebede (2004:183) argues that much of Africa's post-colonial dilemma is caused by the imposition of the Western model and the subsequent alienation and fragmentation of African societies.

Amina Mama (2001:253) agrees with Kebede’s view and argues that the colonial experience has affected all aspects of social, cultural, political and economic life in post-colonial African states; the West still has an influence even after independence. The legacy of colonisation is widespread and continues to influence areas such as culture, thought patterns as well as juridical, economic and administrative systems in the post-colonial state. The language of the colonisers still dominates after independence. The influence of the West is still strong in the mass media and influences the way that women and their roles are represented. For example, the ideal image of beauty is in many cases presented in the media by young European models, ignoring black women.
Eze (1997:13) states that by denying African culture, Europe was able to represent itself as the ideal culture, the ideal humanity and ideal history. Europeans originally introduced the notion of a ‘difference’ between themselves and Africans as a way of justifying the unspeakable exploitation and denigration of Africans. European philosophers entitled themselves to the exclusive right of control over the documentation of Africa’s history, using the perspective of the West. Mudimbe (1988:xv) agrees with Eze and states that modern African thought seems to basically be the product of the West and that Africa must deconstruct Western concepts of Eurocentric stereotypes.

Eze (1997:9) states that:

Colonial and capitalist expansions are therefore a logical necessity for the realization of the obviously universal European Idea, and by labelling the non-European territories and peoples as “backward” in “industry”, they became legitimate prey for colonial and colonialist activities.

According to Bhabha, colonised people have resisted the power of the colonisers by means of hybridity, a key concept he introduced into post-colonial theory. Hybridity refers to the creation of new transcultural systems within the contact situation produced by colonisation as there is an inter-dependence between coloniser and colonised (Bhabha, 1994:112).

Hybridity (Sim, 2011:261) can thus be seen as a counter-narrative of the philosophy of exclusion of other narratives. It takes many forms including cultural, political and linguistic elements. Hybridity allows a means of evading the replication of the binary oppositions of the colonial past and of developing new modes of cultural exchange and growth. With hybridity, just as with mimicry, a person can react against the cultural and social construction of race by colonial
society. Bhabha (1994:112) contends that all cultural systems are constructed in the ‘third space of enunciation’. This space is based on the establishing and expression of culture’s hybridity and not on the idea of the diversity of cultures, or multi-culturalism. In this space one may evade the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves.

Colonial mimicry is, according to Bhabha (1994:86), the desire to create a transformed, identifiable other as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite. In colonial times the colonised mimicked the coloniser in order not to be a seen as ‘the other’. With the process of mimicry, the colonised takes on the appearance of the colonial power by mimicking social and cultural codes of conduct, as well as speaking the coloniser’s language. Suppressed groups of the colonial period had their identities constructed on their behalf by the colonisers, compelling them to enact the roles attributed to them by the colonisers (Bhabha, 1994:87).

Bhabha (1994:88) refers to the term mimicry as the action that:

[r]eppeats rather than re-presents and in that very act of repletion, originality is lost and centrality de-entered…. What is left is the trace, the impure, the artificial; the second-hand.

Mimicry is the potentially more light-hearted copying of the coloniser’s social roles, whereas hybridity is a forceful attempt to counteract the binary oppositions of the coloniser and permit the forming of new identities.

For Bhabha (in Sim, 2011:262) hybridity captures the liberating potential of opposing cultures, by undermining dualistic categories and initiating the forming of
new identities, in between the binary oppositions of coloniser and colonised. It is an encounter between two different cultural groups where each has an influence and impact on the other, forming new cultural sites.

Black women were doubly discriminated against in colonial society. Black women were subjected to being classified as being black, as well as being female. Spivak (1994:67) writes about the voiceless, the excluded, of those who were subjected to double colonisation (the native subaltern woman), in the first instance in the domestic sphere where patriarchy ruled and in the second instance in the public sphere where the patriarchy of the colonial power dominated black women.

Racial, combined with gender, discrimination affected most women in the colonial period. There are still remaining structures of discrimination left in the post-colonial states. Black women were oppressed because of both race and sex. Collins (1998:347) states: “The black woman, being neither white nor male, represents a double lack in the psycho-sexual colonial schema; the antithesis of both whiteness and established notions of femininity and masculinity”. Hall (1997:335) argues that there is a link between racial prejudice and the media, for example stereotyping the black woman as a domestic worker. He claims that the media exploits the poor and powerless. Hall (1997:34) states that black people are often represented in racially stereotyping roles in the media, for example as unskilled workers, domestic servants and unemployed individuals in informal settlements.

Collins (1998:346) says that maintaining images of black women as ‘the other’ provides ideological justification for race, gender and class oppression. The ‘other’
is viewed as an object to be manipulated and controlled. As objects, one’s reality, identity, history and social position are defined for one by the dominant party.

Spivak’s (1994:67) work focuses on the ‘epistemic violence’ that imperialism inflicted on colonised people and the representation of women from the non-Western world. Her concept of ‘the female subaltern consciousness’ is motivated by her desire to do justice to the heterogeneity of the experience of colonised women. Spivak (1994:103) maintains: “In the context of colonial production, the female subaltern has no history and cannot speak”. Spivak’s contribution as a post-colonial feminist is grounded in identifying the differences between women from different geographical areas around the world. According to Spivak (in Ray, 2009:107), mainstream feminism in the USA maintains that ‘the personal is the political’. The question could be asked: What is personal and what is political for women in post-colonial countries? Women from the former colonies view feminism from a perspective that differs from that of women from the West, because of their unique history, culture and experiences under colonial rule.

Gilkes (1983: 288), for example, offers the opinion that the dominant ideology of the slave era fostered the creation of four interrelated, socially constructed, controlling images of black womanhood, relevant particularly in the American context. Each myth reflects the dominant group’s interest in maintaining black women’s subordination, and includes the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother and the Jezebel.

The first controlling image applied to African American women is that of the mammy (Gilkes, 1983:288-300), the faithful, obedient domestic servant. In the
South African context, the domestic maid can be seen as a controlling, socially constructed image of black women by the ideology of colonialism. The second controlling image is the matriarch who symbolises the mother figure in black homes. A third, externally defined, controlling image of black womanhood is that of the welfare mother. A false image is created of black women as being unwilling to work. The fourth controlling image is that of the ‘Jezebel’, the sexual object of desire. These four controlling images of black womanhood provide effective justification for the abuse of black women.

In contrast to the negative, socially constructed, controlling images of black womanhood, the Big Mama figure is a positive representation of a certain type of female figure that does not adhere to the dominant culture’s historical negative conception of images of black females. Faust (2013:3) states that the Big Mama figure in the American context refers to a positive representation of black womanhood, which black women have collectively been able to retain in the white, capitalistic, patriarchal order. The Big Mama is seen as a respected elderly figure whose position in the family and community has been earned based on her life experiences and age. She is a caretaker of her own family as well as those outside her family, especially younger black females. According to Faust (2013:10) Big Mama often displays a strong commitment towards religion and she has a sage-like wisdom. She is proud of her family, her people and her culture. She usually plays a role in keeping the family together. Different mythical constructions of black femininity operate in South Africa, as will be clarified.
2.3 Summary

Applying semiotics to the phenomena of visual culture offers a means to analyse signs. The media is used to advance the dominant ideology, which appears in the form of myths which are socially constructed truths that are supported by an ideological meaning. Baudrillard (1998:129) refers to the omnipresence of the female body in the visual media. In this study the impact of signs, codes, myths and ideology of society on the embodiment of the female form will be investigated using semiotic analysis. Basic terms of semiotics are discussed such as metonomy, metaphors, irony, myth, intertextuality and visual images.

In opposition to the post-feminist perspective, specific third wave ideas, can be applied in the analysis of the artworks including the following; Judith Butler’s opinion on gender construction, the views of Naomi Wolf (1991:83), Rebecca Walker (1992:40), Thomas Crash and Thomas Pruzinsky (1990:6) on the harmful and stereotypical assumptions about women in visual culture. The aim of this dissertation is to analyse the way that the selected artworks demonstrate perspectives of third wave feminism and post-colonialism in their work.

In this study the way in which black women are portrayed by the selected South African female artists is investigated, from a third wave feminist as well as post-colonial perspective.
CHAPTER 3: SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF THE ARTWORKS

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter the selected artworks of Nandipha Mntambo and Mary Sibande as well as one of my own artworks will be analysed by applying semiotics. An in-depth interpretation of the signs in the selected artworks will be made, using perspectives from third wave feminism and post-colonialism to inform the semiotic analysis.

In order to conduct a semiotic analysis of the selected artworks, the connotations, denotations, myths and ideologies in the artworks will be identified. This will allow a decoding of the artwork’s meanings.

3.2 Semiotic analysis of selected artworks of Nandipha Mntambo

Nandipha Mntambo was born in Swaziland in 1982. She graduated with a Master’s degree in Fine Art from the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town, in 2007. She studied forensic pathology before deciding to study art. She worked with a taxidermist where she learnt to tan cowhides, which form one of her main media. She uses cowhide, which is traditionally used as a covering for human bodies, as boneless sculptures, suggestive of a female figure. Mntambo was the 2011 winner of the Standard Bank Young Artist Award for Visual Art. Currently she is living and working in Johannesburg (Mntambo, 2011).
3.2.1 Emabutfo (‘Soldiers’)

Figure 3-1: Nandipha Mntambo, Emabutfo (cowhide, resin, polyester mesh, waxed cord), 2009, 24 figures, each approximately 120cm x 60cm x 20cm; installation approximately 120cm x 230cm x 440cm, Jochen Zeitz Collection (www.stevenson.info).

3.2.1.1 Denotation

Denotation is the exact, dictionary meaning of the sign (Barthes, 1977:38). The denotative aspects of the installation are three rows of dress-like body casts made of cowhide hanging from the ceiling by wires. The cowhides are moulded from bodycasts of Mntambo. Facing these sculptures is a sculpture of her mother’s bodycast.

The sleeves of the dresses are made from the tails of cows. Each part of the total artwork looks different from each other. The difference is visible in the variety of
ways in which the cowhides have been draped and the different necklines, seam lines and sleeves. This is due to the use of different cowhides of varying shapes and sizes. The cowhide was prepared and processed by Mntambo and was then shaped while it was soft and malleable to make a mould of her body. The collection of sculptures in this artwork form a unified whole and is arranged in a formal arrangement.

3.2.1.2 Connotation

The connotative sign (Chandler, 2002:142) is where the signifier refers to the secondary meaning of the signified. According to Barthes (in Chandler, 2002:246), connotation is the second order of signification which uses the denotative sign as its signifier and attaches to it an additional signified. The social, cultural and personal associations of the viewer of the text are of importance in connotation.

Cattle (Hammond-Tooke, 1993:48) were seen as the primary symbol of the wealth of an individual in traditional southern African cultural heritage. One connotation for the cowhide she uses could therefore be the wealth of an individual. The use of cowhide as the material for the artwork also connotes the artist’s traditional Nguni African roots (McIntosh, 2008:2). The Nguni cattle (Clulton-Brock, 1989: 202) breed was brought to southern Africa by the Xhosa, Zulu and Swazi people, during their migration south between 600 and 1400 AD. Cattle played an important social and economic role in their societies and are used as a bride’s dowry.

An additional connotation of the cow is its use in the payment of lobola, a custom in most African cultures. Lobola is a bride-price or bride-gift. The groom must pay lobola (Clark, 2009:11) to his future in-laws before he is allowed to marry their
daughter. The ‘value’ of the *lobola* refers directly to the young woman’s social standing in her community. *Lobola* is also a token of gratitude on the part of the groom to parents of the bride for their care while raising her. The cowhide dresses relate to traditional African culture where the cow can be associated with the woman by way of providing sustenance, protection as well as riches to their families in the form of dowries (Mntambo, 2012:2). Through the use of dresses made of cowhide, the artist seems to refer to the value of women in her society.

In the artwork, *Emabutto*, the signifier ‘femininity’, connoted by the shape of the moulds, is linked to the signifier ‘fertility’. The connotation is not only the payment of *lobola*, but it is also linked to the fertility of women. The ancient Egyptian goddess, Hathor (*Dictionary of Mythology*, 1994:74), for example, is an Egyptian mother and fertility goddess. She is the goddess of love, beauty and fertility and is represented as a cow, or by cow’s horns. The Egyptian goddess, Neith (Cirlot, 2002:65), is also represented by the horns of a cow and she is the symbol of motherhood. The sign symbolises fertility and by making a mould of cowhide, this meaning is the transferred sign for woman. According to Williamson (1978:25) transference occurs when certain qualities from one sign are transferred to another sign. The female shape of the cowhide establishes a similarity, establishing a stronger link between the two signs, femininity and fertility, an example of transference.

Mntambo explores the physical and tactile properties of hide and aspects of control that allow or prevent her from manipulating this material in the context of the female body (Mntambo, 2009:2). The process of shaping the cowhide into feminine forms is a complicated procedure and it is difficult to execute due to the
physical properties of the hide. In this artwork she seeks to challenge and subvert preconceptions regarding representation of the female body, by using cowhides to mould the female shapes. This material is not normally used to portray the female shape.

The shapes of the dresses seem to be exclusive and very expensive. This connotation can be attributed to the long flowing sleeves and off-shoulder design of the dresses. The dresses give the impression of being unique couture type dresses by the way that they are arranged and because each dress looks slightly different and unique. Corrigall (2011:29) states that Mntambo exploits the language of fashion in her art. The artist arranges the cowhide dresses in a type of display as if on rails in a clothing shop, linking to the idea of an exclusive fashion establishment. From a third wave feminist perspective, the dresses seem to encourage an association with consumerist beauty and compliance with the male gaze because they conform to a traditional expectation regarding feminine adornment. The artwork initially entices the viewer to come closer and view the prospective purchases. However, the dresses made of cowhide are not the expected material used to represent femininity, because in the fashion industry, femininity is associated with soft, flowing fabrics. These dresses provoke an ambivalent reaction, both of attraction and repulsion. The artist plays with the connotations of couture and beauty versus ugliness. Mntambo explores the tension between the appealing and the unappealing by manipulating these two aspects of the hide in her artwork (McIntosh, 2008:1).

One female faces the larger series of moulds, connoting the relationship between mother and daughter. The ‘mother’ cast is facing the different ‘daughter’ casts. The
solitary figure faces the series in the manner that a teacher faces the classroom, and this connotes the transmission of cultural norms and feminine roles in the sense that the mother figure seems (in this context) to be showing her daughter the expected feminine roles. According to constructivist theory (Butler 1997:394), gender roles are learned over a period of time by an individual by way of repetition and through example of other members of the same gender in society. The representation of the mother figure facing the body casts of her daughters calls to mind this constructivist theory. The mother is the embodiment of the female figure and teaches her daughter the expected feminine roles prescribed by society. Again, the artwork is polysemic and open-ended. The mother figure is also positioned in a manner suggestive of a military leader, addressing the troops. In this sense, she also connotes rebellion, possibly against patriarchal views, as suggested by the context.

3.2.1.3 Ideology and myth

Myths (Chandler, 2002:254) operate through codes that reflect the dominant ideology of society. Ideology appears in the form of myths. Myths serve the ideological function of making dominant cultural values, attitudes and beliefs seem entirely natural, normal, self-evident, timeless and obvious. They serve the ideological interest of the dominant race or clan (Chandler, 2002:145).

The first myth that can be identified in the artwork is the myth of beauty, suggested by the way the artworks are hung like couture dresses in a shop, supporting the ideologies of consumerism and reflecting the views of patriarchy concerning the role of women in society. The cowhides are aligned and are displayed in a manner suggestive of couture and therefore, the dresses may at first glance seem to
suggest the adoption of prescribed standards of beauty and therefore in support of the beauty myth. According to Wolf (2006: 486), the myth of beauty and the code that upholds it is a way to keep women under control by imprisoning them in their bodies. In the mass media, only specific types of bodies are seen as beautiful. Wolf (2006:487) states that ‘gaunt, youthful models’ are commonly represented, establishing the criteria for beauty. The myth creates a mandate to be beautiful. In order to be successful, accepted and of value, a woman must be beautiful. The myth of beauty supports male dominance, because it makes women prisoners of the idea that they must attract the male gaze in order to be accepted. Mntambo seems at first to comply with those accepted social roles as can been seen in the row of beautiful dresses, which connotes femininity and conformity with the patriarchal myth of beauty being a female quality. According to Wolf (2006:468) beauty is a currency system. This myth links to consumerist ideology, because of the importance placed on the value and currency of beauty in women.

As will be clarified, Mntambo also uses cowhide as a means to undermine expected associations with femininity and sexuality. The artwork is polysemic and ambiguous, so that many meanings are created simultaneously. While the artwork seemingly celebrates femininity and its association with fertility and its place in the patriarchal system in terms of lobola, it simultaneously undercuts those connotations with a further connotation of opposition. As suggested by the title, the three rows of neatly arranged sculptures denote a platoon of soldiers. Such platoons are associated with resistance against colonial powers during that era and therefore can be seen as a possible reaction against colonialism. In the context of this artwork the formation of a platoon of exclusively female soldiers can be seen as suggesting a rejection of the ideology of patriarchy, by showing
organised resistance to the male power figure. It refers to the power of women as an organised unity, fighting for a society where the rights and roles of women are honoured and accepted. This interpretation is valid because other connotations of beauty, femininity and fertility evoke gender-related issues. The ‘women’ seem to be mimetically accepting their prescribed role in society in terms of the fertility connotation but, because of the ambivalence engendered by the military reference, an interpretation of opposition emerges. Mimicry (Tyler, 2003:30) is a method used by women to give the impression of complying with the accepted social roles for women prescribed by patriarchy, but can be employed as subversive strategy.

By emphasising the binary of beauty versus ugliness, Mntambo questions the notion of beauty. On closer inspection the type of material she uses is in direct contrast to the material normally used for dresses. The fabric normally used for dresses is soft and smooth and does not possess the hairiness and hardness of hide. Mntambo reacts against the myth of beauty by making dresses, objects normally used to enhance beauty, into something disgusting, as raw cowhide next to the skin is repellent. It shows a reaction against the views of society as regards the myth of beauty. However, the hollow of each dress implies and connotes a particular body because each has a specific shape. A variety of voluptuous body shapes are represented that do not conform to the expected ideal.

The variety of the moulds and the particularity thereof contrast with the normal fashionable ideal propagated by the media where the female body is presented as a simulacrum and consumer object (Baudrillard, 1998:129). The myth of woman as commodity in capitalist ideology can be identified in the artwork. The fact that
the moulds are without bodies, in the context of haute couture, can be interpreted as suggesting the absence of the true representation of women in the media, in that women are treated in the mass media as objects and are not represented as individuals in their own right. The sale of products is more important than the individual woman’s character and personality. In terms of the title of the work, this suggestion of absence can also metaphorically refer to the ideology of colonialism, where the individuality, dignity and cultural heritage of black persons were ignored.

Moreover, the dresses seem to evoke the supposed relation between women and nature. However, the artwork simultaneously evokes a militant feminist stance, which undermines this initial interpretation. The myth of woman and nature suggests that a woman is in closer contact with nature than man. Ortner (1974:73) states that in patriarchal culture, women are symbolically associated with nature (which is denigrated in this system), as opposed to men, who are identified with culture, which is venerated. The myth developed from the fact that a woman’s body makes it possible for her to carry a baby, to give birth, nurture an infant and take care of a child. There is an ambiguity in Mntambo’s reference to nature. However, as with beauty myth, this initial interpretation is challenged. She has appropriated this notion of woman being equated with nature and used it in a challenging manner by means of the military connection.
3.2.2 Europa

Figure 3-2: Nandipha Mntambo, *Europa* (archival pigment ink on cotton rag paper), 2008, 112cm x 112cm, Edition of 5 + 2 AP, Gordon Schachat Collection, private collections. (www.stevenson.info [Accessed: 28/08/2012])

3.2.2.1 Denotation

*Europa* (figure 3.2) is a digital print of Mntambo posing as a type of Minotaur. The background of the photograph is black and the head, shoulders and bust of the artist are visible. She is facing the camera directly, making eye contact with the viewer. She has horns and ears like a bull and her face appears to be partly covered in hide. There is stillness in the pose of the figure and the white of her eyeballs stands out against the darkness of the portrait. Her right shoulder is lower
than her left shoulder and her collar bones are visible. Only the outline of her shoulders is visible in the photograph as well as her left breast. The powerful gaze of the portrait holds the viewer’s attention. The horns stand out as an outline in the photograph, because of the lighter tone, compared to the rest of the photograph. The horns and the ears form a strong horizontal line. Her face is in the middle of the photograph. The light falls on her left shoulder, highlighting it. Her face is covered in hair which resembles cowhide. She does not show emotion. There is an ambiguity in the figure as it is part beast and part human.

3.2.2.2 Connotation

The title of the artwork refers to a Greek myth of Europa (Dictionary of Mythology, 1994:62) who is the daughter of Agenor, King of Tyre in Phoenicia. Zeus assumed the form of a white bull and came out of the waves as Europa and her maidens were playing on the shore. She was beguiled by him and jumped upon his back, and Zeus swam with her back into the sea to Crete. According to the myth, Europa was raped by Zeus and subsequently had a child by him, whom she called Minos. Because of Zeus’ association with Classical Greece, as well as his frequent relations with women, he connotes white, male power. In the context of the artwork, this interpretation is strengthened by the reference to its binary opposites; blackness and femininity. Here Mntambo conflates the signifiers Zeus (in the guise of a bull) and the female, Europa, by presenting a female as a bull, under the title Europa. The work is semiotically polyvalent. By referring to Zeus, there is a connotation of virility as well as power and domination. This combines with the denotation ‘woman’.
The title of the artwork, suggesting a connection to Europe by naming it so, can be described as ironic. The title of the artwork refers to Europe, a name which forms the basis of the name of the European continent. The portrayal of the subject is in direct contrast to the myth of Europe and what it stands for, as the artist’s dark skin marks her as being of African, rather than European descent. The artist uses irony to help emphasise the binary of black versus white and thus to convey her meaning. As stated previously, cattle are seen as a valuable asset in South Africa and Mntambo’s artwork also elicits this connotation, because her dark skin in this context serves as metaphor for Africa.

Berger (1972:129) states that the gaze is a tool used in art to reinforce and maintain the gender-based power structures that still exist in society. Usually the gaze indicates European male dominance. It also includes aspects such as ownership, possession and power. The figure also connotes power because bull horns inherently connote brute strength. The gaze is directed especially toward the female nude, but in this case, the naked female exudes a gaze of her own and challenges the male gaze. The artist also looks directly at the viewer in a bold, confident and challenging way, instead of allowing a voyeuristic gaze to wander across her naked body. In this artwork Mntambo uses the gaze herself to portray her dominance over the viewer of the artwork. This sense of power is reinforced by her appropriation of the guise of Zeus. In the Renaissance tradition portraits are usually reserved for prominent male figures like political or cultural leaders. In place of a representation of an important person of European culture or history, this depiction suggests a directly opposite representation. Mntambo (Dakar Biennale, 2010:1) challenges male and female roles in society and the expected
associations of femininity and sexuality. The subject matter is a woman and not a man as seen in patriarchal tradition.

3.2.2.3 Ideology and myth

Mntambo represents Africa in her artwork, instead of the ‘Europe’ suggested by the title. The figure of the woman has a strong presence. By her portrayal of the woman with bull’s features, she makes a statement about the ideology of colonialism and the myth of Africa, as a dark and primitive continent. According to the above mentioned myth and ideology, Africa was portrayed as a dangerous, primitive and ‘Dark Continent’ (Masolo, 1994:127). The darkness of the image serves as metaphor for the mythical unavailability of Africa. The image of the woman portrays a mythical, primitive and half human/half animal creature, which is a reflection of the way that Africa was viewed during colonial times. However, through hybridity, this stereotype is subverted.

This hybrid figure also evokes the myth of the Minotaur. The Minotaur (Dictionary of Mythology, 1994:109) is, a legendary monster, half man and half bull in Greek mythology, which was the offspring of Pasiphaë and a bull which was presented to her husband Minos, by Poseidon. The Minotaur was placed in the Labyrinth by Minos, where he was later killed by Theseus. De Oliveira (2013, 30) states:

Mntambo’s roles as Minotaur/Zeus and Europa are an embodiment of both active and passive subjects in the Greek mythological narrative and the image itself, allowing her to both comment on and challenge the prescribed active and passive roles of hero/beast (man) and victim (woman) in Western culture, whilst asserting her position and legitimacy as a Black female artist working within and against the Western Art historical canon.

The rape of Europa is a metaphor of colonisation and the effect thereof on the colonised people of Africa. In this artwork it can refer to the domination of the
coloniser, with rape representing the coloniser’s disregard for the rights and dignity of the colonised. The binary oppositions of the colonial past can be identified in the artwork by the following oppositions; male/female, human/animal, white/black and civilised/savage. This artwork seems critical of colonialism as by subverting these oppositions, the black woman is now powerful and threatening with her black skin and nudity. The metaphor of colonisation is created through the combination of a reference to Europe, with her black skin and her nudity and the connotation of rape. All these signifiers together may refer to the binary oppositions of the colonial past.

The work also examines the contrast between colonial and African cultures; the binary oppositions supporting the ideology of colonialism. From a traditional Western perspective, the myth of Africa encompasses an exotic and primitive culture which is in direct contrast to the logical and organised traditional perspective of the West. Although the title of the artwork is Europa (figure 3.2), the image in the artwork is in direct opposition to this idea. It interrelates the two poles of binary opposition between Europa and Africa, by means of hybridity.

Hybridity (Bhabha, 1994:112) is a counter-narrative opposing the philosophy of exclusion of other narratives. In this case the narrative is that of the artist who shows her own interpretation of her culture and history from her own perspective. The artist suggests that a new identity is formed, independent of the cultural practices of the colonial past. The colonised was forced to conform to the persona of the coloniser, but hybridity is a subversive strategy. The hybrid creature is both self and other, and this challenges colonial notions of identity. Mntambo employs the notion of hybridity by portraying Europa (figure 3.2) in a radically contrasti
way to that of the expected image of Europa. The subject is a black woman with
bull’s features that does not comply with the colonisers’ perception of Europa. The
Minotaur has the face and tail of a bull and the body of a man and is thus
emblematic of hybridity. In this context the creature is a mixture of European and
African cultures.

Mntambo uses the features of the bull in combination with her own features. This
gives the impression that the subject of the artwork is of mythological importance,
something that was ignored in the treatment by the West of African culture during
colonial times (Masolo, 1994:127). Only the culture of the coloniser was
considered to be of importance. The artist makes the statement that the subject of
the artwork is of value and importance in her society. Additionally, the use of
chiaroscuro, which is associated with the Baroque portrait tradition, acts to
heighten the sense of the significance of the person portrayed.

The colonial myth (Mudimbe, 1988:XV) representing Africa as instinctual and
primitive has been appropriated by the artist. This notion is represented by the
figure of the African Minotaur, signifying the menace of the hybrid colonial subject.
She re-codes her body by showing strength, rather than passivity. Thus it can refer
to the ideology of colonialism and the myth of Africa, where the strength of the
animal is intermingled with the figure of the black woman, giving her a mythical
presence of strength and power. This is in direct contrast to the myth of
colonialism where the colonised was viewed as the ‘other’ to the coloniser as the
‘one’ and thus as weaker or inferior. In this artwork, the artist represents the
subject of her own identity, as well as pride in her cultural roots.
Aspects of difference can be identified in the artwork. Difference (Faludi, 1992:362) refers to the different experiences that women of third world countries have to women from first world countries regarding their feminine roles and identity. It is a third wave feminist perspective (Tong, 2009:284). Women from former colonies experience the concept of feminism in a different way, compared to women from the West. This can be attributed to the experience of colonial domination and different cultural traditions. Mohanty (Kemp, 1997:96) claims that the universal images of women from the developing world are images constructed by adding the ‘third world difference’ to ‘sexual difference’. From this vantage point of the West, it is presumed that third world women are underdeveloped and economically dependent (McRobbie, 2007:35). This artwork addresses both racial and gender-based otherness.

Gilman (2003:138) states that black women were seen, in colonial times, by white society in terms of sexual difference and were objects of attraction and fear. The black female body was viewed, in Europe, as an icon for sexuality. Mntambo examines this from a critical perspective, in terms of her reference to male sexual violence.

3.2.3 Summary of Emabutfo and Europa

The artist has a close connection to her traditional Swazi heritage as can be seen in the use of cowhide for the dresses. The artist explores her feminine role and identity in a post-colonial society. She celebrates her femininity by the making of and displaying of dresses in this artwork. Mntambo reacts to the myth of beauty by using her own body and that of her mother as the casts for the dresses. She reacts against the stereotyping of women as consumer and sex objects in
consumer society. The artist explores the idea of gender construction in this artwork.

The artist examines the importance of women in society and their role in general. In *Europa* (figure 3.2), she incorporates the mythological aspects of combining the face of the female with that of a bull. This shows her close relationship with her cultural roots, as well as a reaction to the dominance of the European male figure of the past. Her artwork serves to critique both racial and gender discrimination.

### 3.3 Semiotic analysis of selected artworks of Mary Sibande

Mary Sibande was born in 1982 in Barberton (Mpumalanga) and was raised by her grandmother. Sibande’s father, a member of the South African Defence Force, was not around when she was growing up. She met him for the first time when she was sixteen. Later she moved to Johannesburg and continued her schooling there. She received her diploma in Fine Art from the Technikon Witwatersrand. She studied B. Tech. Fine Art at the University of Johannesburg and received her degree in 2007. Sibande had her first solo exhibition in 2009. Sibande has taken part in the Johannesburg Art City World Premiere Annual Exhibition with a project titled *Long live the dead queen*, which premiered in June 2010 to coincide with the 2010 World Soccer Cup. She was chosen to represent South Africa at the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011. In 2013 she was the winner of the Standard Bank Young Artist Award for Visual Art. She has a studio in Doornfontein, Johannesburg (Sibande, 2014a).
3.3.1 Wish you were here

Figure 3-3: Mary Sibande, *Wish you were here (Long live the dead queen series)*. (Multimedia installation with fibreglass and 100% cotton fabric), 2010, life-size, (www.artthrob.co.za/artists/Mary-Sibande).

3.3.1.1 Denotation

The installation *Wish you were here*, (figure 3.3) consists of a life size model of Mary Sibande in a sitting position. The folds of her dress are spread around her figure on the floor. It is a realistic portrayal of a female figure dressed in an elaborate dress. It is royal blue with ruffles in front and big puffed sleeves. She has a white frilly apron around her waist and a white headscarf wrapped around her head. The full skirt of the dress is extravagantly draped around her on the floor, forming a ruffled pattern. It is not a costume that is practical because it would be impossible to stand in it, as it would be too long. The dress resembles a Victorian
era outfit. It is a South African domestic dress combined with an upper-class Victorian outfit hybrid.

Sibande named the figure in the series, Sophie. Sibande uses her own body and face as the cast for the artwork. She has both her arms spread out in front of her, handling the thread of a huge ball of red wool that is placed on the folds of her skirt. A framed tapestry hangs on the wall with the letter S and a type of heraldic crest embroidered on it. The background is white and the colour red is used in the letter and heraldic crest. Threads of wool hang from the frame and Sophie handles the wool which is connected to the red ball of wool. It appears that she is busy unthreading the tapestry and rolling the wool thread into a ball. She seems to be intent on her task, concentrating, oblivious to her surroundings. The skin tone of the figure glows in contrast to the matt surface of the dress. The stark white walls of the exhibition space form a contrast to the richly dressed figure. The window to the right corner of the room shows a city landscape of buildings.

3.3.1.2 Connotation

Sophie’s name is derived from Sophia, which means wisdom (Romanoff, 2015: 1). This can connote that Sophie is a person with insight, intelligence and knowledge. Sibande (in Wiarda, 2011:2) states that she painted Sophie entirely in bold black, “representing the shadow that follows me throughout life – neither positive nor negative, but a simple fact of my life and evidence of the impossible life that I may have lead”. This shows that she is aware of and possibly confident in her identity, as well as her cultural heritage. The artist rendered the body of Sophie in a bold black shiny colour, emphasising her ethnicity.
The rich royal blue of her dress connotes royalty. The colour royal blue was invented by millers in Somerset, who won a competition to make a dress for the British queen, Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz (1744-1818). She was the wife of King George III (Olwen, 1975:26). The colour of the dress suggests that Sophie is in fact royalty herself and means that she is of importance and enjoys a high status. This is also confirmed by the heraldic shield (which connotes a high social status) and the detail of the dress which can be seen in the ruffles, sleeves and full skirt. It is a dress fit for a queen, or at least for a Victorian lady. However, the fabric used to make the dress, is a polyvalent and ambiguous signifier, as its texture and colour also remind one of the fabric used for workman’s overalls and maid’s uniforms (Wiarda, 2011:1). The material that Sibande uses for Sophie’s dresses is also inspired by the distinctive, blue fabric of the Zionist church, a third connotation (Balboa-Pöysti, 2011:5).

The whiteness of the apron forms a contrast to her royal blue dress. From a post-colonial perspective, it could be interpreted that the white apron might symbolise the break from the contamination of her colonial or apartheid past. The white headscarf and apron symbolise purity. The white can be seen to suggest that her future is a blank canvas, waiting for her to draw upon it, as she has done with her heraldic embroidery, which is also on white. It can also refer to her cultural background where women do handcraft work. The ball of yarn is much larger than a normal ball of yarn. The heraldic shield spells an ‘S’, presumably for ‘Sophie’. It suggests her ability to construct her own identity. The scale of the ball of yarn suggests empowerment, the ability to infinitely create her own identity. She has appropriated this notion of domesticity and transformed it into an empowering image.
Her elaborate Victorian dress is in contrast to the stillness of her posture and deep concentration. The elaborate nature of the dress may possibly connote vanity. Wiarda (2011:2) states that it was both the high fashion Sibande encountered in magazines and the stiff uniforms (of the same fabric as domestic workers’ uniforms) worn by the Zionist churchgoers that informed the artist in her examination of the relationship between identity, ethnic and cultural history and desire and fantasy.

The design of the dress, because it is very feminine, also suggests that Sophie is proud of her femininity. This can be observed in the layers of ruffles on the dress, blue net fabric, the big puffy sleeves and detail on the collar of her outfit. Her personality is also evident, because she dresses herself in a dress that is not practical for doing maid’s work. She seems to dress the way that she does, because she is confident in herself.

Balboa-Pöysti (2011:3) interprets Sophie’s dress as a protest against being a domestic worker and as a façade that allows her fantasies to come true, a notion supported by the title of the artwork. Intertextuality can be identified in Wish you were here (figure 3.5). According to Kristeva (Sim, 2011:265), the meaning of the text can be endless, thus various interpretations can be made of the text. Intertextuality can be identified in this artwork regarding femininity. The meaning of Wish you were here is created intertextually, drawing meaning from other artworks in which Sophie appears. The associations with Sophie in other artworks are also valid here, because of intertextuality. The series, The purple shall govern (figure 3.4) connotes apartheid and race issues by referring to Sophie’s ethnicity and by emphasising it.
In *The purple shall govern* (figure 3.4) for instance the colour purple refers to the purple water used in the cannons to mark anti-apartheid protesters at a gathering in 1989 so that they could be picked up after the protest and charged (Krouse, 2013).

Sophie does not fit the stereotypical perception of what a maid should look like; her whole persona speaks of a person who is in a state of transforming herself, refusing the limitations of her restricted reality. She refers to class by portraying Sophie in a radically different manner compared to a domestic maid.
The Victorian dress refers to a string of hierarchies that existed in those times, for instance class, race and gender. Victorian ladies were largely confined to the home and had to conform to patriarchal ideals regarding femininity, their dresses and corsets were physically confining (Flanders, 2003:379). The artist portrays Sophie in a way that suggests that many of these hierarchies were relevant and also entrenched during the apartheid era and have still not been eradicated. In the South African context the domestic maid is part of colonial heritage. Sibande portrays Sophie as different to the stereotypical view of a maid.

By conflating the servant and the Victorian employer and by mixing different codes for the two, the artist suggests a similarity in terms of the limitations imposed on both of them by society. Similarly, the Victorian age marked the high point of British imperialism and in this context, where Sophie’s ethnicity is emphasised, this aspect is involved. By assimilating signs of power (heraldic device, elaborate dress of a lady), the artist seems to be espousing a post-colonial perspective; identity is no longer defined by a clear self/other distinction.

Although it is a maid’s uniform, because of the various connotations of the dress, such as royalty, religion and so on, Sophie is not portrayed as a person lacking in social status. It suggests that the artist is proud of her heritage. Both her mother and grandmother were domestic workers which forms part of her background (Wiarda, 2011:1). She is proud of the love and encouragement that she received from them (Wiarda, 2012:2). It can be observed in the pride that she demonstrates with the detail and design of the Victorian maid’s dress. The dress that Sophie wears shows her own identity and not that of a faceless, uniformed and impersonal work force. Sophie gives a face to the domestic worker in general and
thereby critiques the stereotypical perceptions about black women in post-colonial South Africa.

Figure 3.5: Mary Sibande, *Wish you were here* (part of the ‘Long live the dead queen’ murals on display on buildings in Johannesburg), 2010, approximately 6m x 36m, Johannesburg (www.designboom.com).

The series of nineteen sculptures, called *Long live the dead queen*, of which *Wish you were here* (figure 3.5) is part, was photographed and put on billboards in the city centre of Johannesburg and on the side of buildings during the FIFA Soccer World Cup in 2010. By being placed on billboards, Sophie gains respect and recognition for who she is. The domestic worker occupies a low position on the social ladder, but here she is shown in a place normally reserved for models or actors or other people that are esteemed in our South African culture. Usually a billboard shows celebrities and well known models advertising products on
billboards and those connotations are applied to Sophie, through the process of transference.

By displaying the artworks on huge billboards and on the side of buildings it becomes public art. The artwork can be viewed by a much larger audience, as well as groups of people who usually have little contact with art, including domestic workers that are commuting. In this case it is a woman dressed in a maid’s dress in a prominent position on the billboard. It is a post-colonial and third wave feminist view of people of difference. Although Sophie is a domestic maid, she receives a voice and an audience by being portrayed in this public manner.

From a third wave feminist perspective she is depicted as a role model for young females, because she is portrayed with respect and shows pride in her femininity. It is important to note that she is deliberately opposing the mass media image and stereotype of a woman.

It can be argued, from of a post-colonial viewpoint, that she gives a voice to the voiceless. She has a presence that cannot be ignored, due to the sheer size and placement of the billboards. The artist places an ordinary maid, who has little social standing in society, on huge billboards which implies an important position that cannot be ignored.

3.3.1.3 Ideology and myth

The stereotype of the maid is a myth in the Barthesian sense. The myth of the maid uses the stereotype of the maid as a compliant and obedient servant that is always in the background performing her duties. She is an invisible fixture in the household. This myth supported apartheid and classist ideology.
The elaborate dress, which connotes wealth and class, is a symbol of protest against the myth of the maid and the ideology of colonialism. The dress makes a comment about the position of being a maid, but is also a disguise that allows her fantasies to come to life. The artist shows that an individual can have dreams and aspirations even though his/her position is that of a domestic worker. She demonstrates, by the representation of Sophie, that in the post-colonial society the potential for a better life exists. By referring to gender as well as racial oppression, the artist expresses her views that the black woman was doubly ‘othered’ in the colonial system for being black, as well as being a woman.

In the *Long live the dead queen series* the artist also examines the beauty myth regarding the ideology of consumerism. By placing Sophie on a billboard, she is placed in a consumerist context, although she is portrayed in direct contrast to consumerist expectations. She does not conform to the normal consumerist expectations regarding fashion or the model’s class. Though the dress is certainly beautiful, it is anachronistic and it has been hybridised with a maid’s uniform. Also, the woman’s identity is emphasised rather than focusing purely on her beauty.

Aspects of mimicry can be viewed in her giving an impression of complying with the accepted social roles for women (Tyler, 2003:30). Although she gives this impression superficially, she appropriates these ironically, manipulating them from a critical internal distance. On an intertextual level, Sophie takes on various roles in her various incarnations. This aspect demonstrates that Sophie has different feminine roles and that she is not restricted to the position of a maid as her primary role in life. Regarding this aspect, colonial mimicry can also be identified, as Sophie apparently complies with the standard for a maid, but subverts it by the
style and design of her dress. This aspect can be viewed as feminist mimicry, as she seems to act in compliance with prescribed feminine roles. Mimicry and hybridity both undermine stereotypes, which are mythical constructions.

In her portrayal of Sophie in a Victorian lady’s dress, combined with modern domestic uniform, Sibande also uses hybridity to evade the replications of the binary oppositions of the colonial past by developing new means of cultural exchange and growth (Bhabha, 1994:150). The position of the domestic servant is seen on the lower rungs of the occupational ladder. By representing Sophie with such a presence of dignity and pride and hybridised with a Victorian lady, she undermines the old binary oppositions of the past.

3.3.2 Summary

Mary Sibande uses the female figure to demonstrate her views on women and their role, identity and position in society. Her artworks representing Sophie, from the series *Long live the dead queen*, were analysed using semiotics in order to identify denotations, connotations, myths and ideologies in her artwork. She does not conform to the stereotypical view of a maid. The connotation can be made that Sophie has broken free of the restrictions of patriarchy and colonial rule. She becomes a role model for women, showing them that women should receive respect and recognition in society.

The artist takes a stand against the myth of beauty and the ideology of consumerism, by portraying Sophie as an emancipated woman who knows what she wants from life and who is content with her role and position in society. The billboards of Sophie enhance her presence and position in society. Sibande reacts
in this way against the myth of consumerism and the ideology of capitalism. The story of Sophie is the story of the progress made in the position of the black woman in South African society.

3.4 Analysis of own artwork

3.4.1 Background

A brief examination of traditional African embroidery in the context of South Africa will be undertaken in order to clarify certain semiotic aspects of my own work. Many of these community embroideries reflect the everyday life of black women, where they portray the life that they lead in mostly rural environments. This can be viewed as a reflection of contemporary African rural culture. In my work I attempt to portray my daily activities and they are a reflection of my life as a woman of European descent. In this sense it is parallel to the work of the black women who make these embroideries. In my artwork I portray life from my own life experience and cultural background. Like Sibande and Mntambo, I examine the relation between Western and African ideas.

African culture has a long history of craft making. Craft (Contemporary African craft, 2014) is the production of an item that requires skill to produce it. African traditional culture is known for its functional and utilitarian crafts that include a wide spectrum of disciplines, such as pottery, clothing, beadwork, embroidery, textiles and cultural artefacts. Within traditional African society, handcrafts are respected for their visual, symbolic and spiritual dimensions, alongside their decorative and aesthetic qualities, as well as their functional value. Master craftsmen and women enjoy special status within their communities and are respected members of the society. Women play an important role in the making of handcrafts.
Embroidery is one example of such handcrafts. In many cases, among rural women in South Africa, an individual woman with art or needlework skills organises a group of local women who create the embroideries in their homes, such as the Mapula Project. A needlework group is formed which produces communal embroideries. The individual embroideries are later formed into cushions, wall hangings and table runners by other women in the group with sewing machines. This is usually done in a workshop on a farm or in the village, whilst the embroideries are done by individual women in their homes. Needlework projects (Schmahmann, 2000:119) share the aim of upgrading the lives of those in disadvantaged communities. The projects have not necessarily been initiated by people within the communities in which they operate, as in some cases an outsider will be responsible for providing assistance in the training, the management of the project and the marketing of the products. The outsiders who are in some cases responsible for organising these groups, are often local white farmers’ wives or missionaries from church groups. Examples are Kaross and Mapula embroidery projects. The embroideries therefore are the result of an interaction between Western and African traditions.

The themes (Schmahmann, 2000:4) of the embroideries vary. In many cases they tell stories of cultural myths and folktales. In other examples, animals are portrayed, or relationships between groups of women and between women and children. They also portray everyday life. The difficulties that women experience in customary marriages and interaction between men and women are sometimes portrayed. Other embroideries reflect on the domestic duties undertaken by women in the rural areas; this can include housework, food production, looking after the family and taking care of children.
The brightly coloured imported yarn, simplified style and black background typical of these embroideries have become a code, connoting ‘Africa’. This code is visible in each of the three examples discussed below. The stylisation of the patterns on the embroideries provides a glimpse of new influences and contact with other cultures, as well as traditional crafts (Contemporary African craft, 2014). Some of the challenges facing African craft making today is how to keep indigenous crafts alive, whilst embracing new technologies and the influences of other countries.

3.4.1.1 Kaross embroidery's Woman shopping

The Kaross embroidery project (2014b) was started by Irma van Rooyen twenty years ago with five women on a farm in the Letsitele Valley, Limpopo. Today Kaross (which means blanket) employs more than a thousand people from the Letsitele Valley and Giyani communities. Their work gives a modern voice to traditional Tsonga culture. The images are bold, simplified and colourful, drawing on Tsonga culture and mythology. The embroideries use black fabric as a base and coloured tapestry yarn to embroider. This aspect influenced my work, as I work on the same principle, but in a more simplified form.

The embroidery, Woman shopping (figure 3.6), depicts a standing female figure on the right side of the picture. She is facing a fruit stand and points with her left hand to the fruit on display. In her right hand she holds a type of a bowl. She wears a yellow top and a traditional printed skirt and on her head is a traditional headscarf. The embroidery is done on a black fabric with colourful yarn.
The woman seems to be happily talking to someone else that is not seen in the picture. She wears traditional clothing. This may suggest that she is living in some rural era. The colourful scene gives the impression of an informal fruit and vegetable stall alongside the road. It is a depiction of an everyday scene in some rural village. The connotation can be made that the woman in her role as the caretaker of the family is portrayed, who seems to be content in her feminine role.

3.4.1.2 Intuthuko embroidery’s *Inside the kitchen*

Another example of embroidery is from the Intuthuko Embroidery group (*African threads*, 2014). Gail de Villiers started the group ten years ago as an income generating project in the desperately poor Etwatwa Township, amongst local women who make quilted squares and embroidery. Gail de Villiers, Susan Haycock and Clarence Nkosi work as a team to develop markets and to keep the
group together. This group has won various prizes for their collective quilts and wall hangings, for example the First National Bank Vita Crafts Award for their work titled *Journey to freedom*, celebrating ten years of democracy in South Africa. The choice of black fabric for the embroideries highlights the foregrounds, with their bright and vivid colours that have come to be associated with Africa.

![Intuthuko Embroidery Group (South Africa), *Inside the kitchen* (hand embroidered quilt square with hand dyed threads onto African cotton), 28cm x 28 cm, commercially available embroidery, (www.africanthreads.co.za/intuthuko-sewing-group/).](image)

The embroidery (figure 3.7) depicts a scene in a kitchen with three female figures. The outside wall of the kitchen is in the foreground, with the door, a window and a type of a bin in which fire is made. Inside the room, one woman is busy at the sink and the two other figures are sitting at the table. The kitchen units are depicted in the background. One figure is busy washing dishes and seems to have served the
other two figures with refreshments, so these denote female roles. It is a domestic scene that is traditionally associated with the woman’s domain. There is an intimate atmosphere in the picture, which suggests a typical domestic scene involving women.
3.4.2 Semiotic analysis of *House-proud*

![Image of House-proud](image)

Figure 3-8: Alta Marais, *House-proud*, (seven hand stitched images arranged in a horizontal line on black cotton fabric), 2014, 234cm x 32cm, artist’s collection.
In my practical work I deal with embroidery and the influences of embroidery produced by black, rural South African women. My practical body of work consists of a series of embroideries, in which I attempt to engage with some of the themes associated with women’s roles in society and with the representation of women in the mass media. The relationship between the theoretical and practical components of my work is both thematic and methodological. The thematic concerns are located in the portrayal of women’s role in society and the way that selected female artists react to this. My work, like the work of Mntambo and Sibande, deals with the female body and identity and the roles of women in society.

3.4.2.1 Denotation

My artwork (figure 3.8) comprises embroidery on black fabric. The format of the artwork is a horizontal format consisting of seven pieces of embroidery. The artwork is framed by ribbon with ethnic patterns, as well as between the different panels. The subject of the artwork is myself ironing, dusting, baking cake, mopping the floor, hanging up washing and washing up dishes. Coloured embroidery thread is used to portray the different scenes in a type of line drawing, using back and cross stitches. The type of material used in this artwork is consistent with the above mentioned African embroideries; Woman shopping (figure 3.6) and Inside the kitchen (figure 3.7).
3.4.2.2 Connotation

There are three types of signs utilised in my embroideries:

- Iconic signs: The embroidered images resemble myself and are therefore iconic.
- Symbolic signs: The embroidered words and speech bubbles are symbolic signs.
- Indexical signs: The embroidery, made by my hand, is indexical of my presence.

The various iconic images of me performing different roles serve to connote my personal identity. This is anchored by the indexical sign of the embroidery, which also points to me. On an iconic level I portray myself doing different household chores. The traditional feminine role of women doing domestic work is demonstrated. The figure looks serene and contented doing her work. This can mean that she is comfortable with her feminine side and role as housewife. The figure is dressed in informal, everyday clothes, consisting of a T-shirt and leggings or a dress. Although she is performing household chores, she is not dressed in a maid’s outfit. In this case the title, *House proud*, connotes ownership of the house. This can mean that the woman does not see her work as a chore, but simply as part of her daily life. The figure looks well-groomed and comfortable in her routine. Her work is not portrayed as being a tedious chore.

3.4.2.3 Ideology and myth

Apart from the traditional roles portrayed, the use of the medium of embroidery, traditionally associated with ‘women’s work’, connotes compliance with a
patriarchal image of desirable femininity. The artwork is ambiguous, as it may also seem to depict a post-feminist perspective, portraying the above mentioned traditional feminine attributes in an empowering manner (Jones, 2003:316). From of a post-feminist perspective, it could be argued that her role of wife, mother and caregiver is seen by herself as an important role.

The iconic signs and the symbolic signs have slightly different connotations. Whereas the iconic signs may connote the woman’s satisfaction with her traditional role as housewife and caregiver, the symbolic signs suggest that her mind is occupied elsewhere, for example, engaging with philosophical questions. In the thinking bubbles in some of the embroideries, key words referring to feminism, post-colonialism and semiotics are placed. This suggests that the figure is thinking of other subjects, whilst busy with her feminine duties. Through the use of terms such as; ‘transformation’, ‘mimicry’, ‘arbitrariness’ and ‘epistemic violence’, the traditional feminine domestic role is subverted. A concern with such issues is not part of the traditional feminine role prescribed by patriarchy and the symbolic signs therefore suggest an opposition to patriarchy.

Referring to the other artworks in this collection, different female roles that move away from tradition are also portrayed. Activities such as horse riding, circuit training at the gymnasium, off-road motorbike scrambling and target shooting are not viewed as traditional feminine roles. This means that the figure has other interests and roles outside of her home. This is a third wave feminist perspective, whereby a woman is seen as having different female roles, and she has a choice and freedom regarding her position in society. This aspect can also be viewed as
a critique against this notion of femininity created by the patriarchal system (Jones, 2003:316).

The figure in the artwork (figure, 3.11) may be presenting an illusion to the outside world of conforming to patriarchal views. The non-traditional roles and symbolic signs that attend images of the figure performing traditional roles, suggest this subversive intent. In this sense, mimicry can be identified in the artwork. Mimicry (Tyler, 2003:23) is often used by women to give the impression of conforming to the approved gender roles of society, by play acting the approved stereotypes of the expected gender roles for women.

The embroidery belongs to the code feminine and traditional African crafts. According to Levine (1988:3) and Halle (2007:2123) these are often associated with popular or lowbrow culture and viewed as distinct from fine arts, and accorded a lower status. Reeser (2010:18) and Broude and Garrard (1994:12) state that whereas art has often been associated with the Western and masculine tradition, craft has historically been associated with the African and feminine tradition. Risatti (2007:117) agrees with this perspective of craft. The context within which my embroidery is displayed, fine art, has historically been accorded greater value than the craft tradition (Silverman, 1992:15). According to Schiebinger (1989:66) and Nochlin (1993:23) the art/craft binary therefore historically corresponds to a hierarchal division according to race and gender. The speech bubbles are metonymic of comics, which are also a form of popular, lowbrow culture. By contrast, the embroidery is presented as an artwork, which could be classified as fine art, which is highbrow culture. Highbrow and lowbrow cultures are hybridised, as the two codes are used simultaneously and without distinction.
The style of the embroidery and the ribbon (the bright colours and black background as well as the theme of everyday life) form part of the code ‘African’ (Schmahmann, 2000:4). In contrast to the ‘African’ theme, the speech bubbles are part of a Western code, from popular culture, namely comics. The woman portrayed is white, of Western descent. Together, these aspects connote ‘Western’. The hybridised codes of ‘Africaness’ and ‘Westerness’ are transferred to my own image, so that my identity emerges as hybrid.

The colonial/apartheid era opposition of ‘black/white’ is challenged when the code for ‘African craft’ is juxtaposed with an image of a white woman working. The work therefore comprises an examination of the relationship, in the South African context, between the hitherto often white housewife and the normally black domestic worker, and the racial connotations associated with each.

In my work the disruption of the art/craft opposition also supports a disruption of the black/white, self/other opposition. The artwork therefore examines the position of a woman, but more particularly a white woman with a Western heritage, in relation to the traditional roles fulfilled by African women. From a post-colonial perspective, it can be stated that doing a maid’s work is not only restricted to certain individuals of society, but that it is a universal role that includes all women. The identity of the woman is therefore negotiated in a manner contrary to the problematic racial binary.

3.4.3 Summary

In my artwork I deal with the female body, her roles in society and her identity. Mntambo and Sibande also use the female body in their artwork. The ways they
represent the female body are vastly different, but the issues of female roles, identity and sexuality are evident in both artists', as well as my own work.

My own embroideries draw semiotic meaning from those produced in communal rural embroidery communities. The embroideries examine feminine roles from a feminist perspective. My embroideries also render the distinctions between art/craft, black/white and Western/African ambiguous.
CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

The research aim as stated in chapter one was to investigate the way that Nandipha Mntambo, Mary Sibande and I have used the female form in art to undermine harmful representations/myths of women. I used a third wave feminist and a post-colonial perspective, as well as semiotics as a theoretical framework. One of my own artworks was analysed in order to ascertain if the above mentioned aspects could be identified in my artwork as well. The method used in this study was a semiotic analysis of selected artworks by the artists, informed by a third wave feminist and post-colonial perspective, which was the theoretical framework formulated in chapter two by the literature study.

Chapter two presented the literature review of semiotics, third wave feminism and post-colonialism that form the theoretical framework used in the analysis of the artwork of Nandipha Mntambo, Mary Sibande and my own work. The visual media has an impact on the cultural practices of society and how societies’ members interpret and make sense of the world. Third wave feminism, post-feminism and post-colonialism were discussed in this chapter. The feminist perspective focused on women of difference, gender construction and the post-feminist viewpoint of women’s role in visual culture. In the literature study on post-colonialism the impact of colonisation on the black women was highlighted. Black women were discriminated against because of race and gender.

In chapter three the semiotic analysis of Mntambo’s artwork was done. It becomes clear that she has a close connection to her traditional African heritage. The artwork *Emabutfo* (figure 3.1) is polysemic and ambiguous, so that many meanings are created simultaneously. While the artwork seemingly celebrates
traditional femininity, its association with fertility and its place in the patriarchal system in terms of lobola, it simultaneously undercuts these connotations with a further connotation of feminist opposition. The ‘women’ seem to be mimetically accepting of their prescribed role within society, but because of this ambivalence, an interpretation of opposition also emerges.

It can be read from a third wave feminist perspective. Mntambo portrays the female figure, with boldness, confidence and strength. In Europa (figure 3.2), she uses the female figure as an integral part in her artworks, which suggest that, the role and identity of womanhood is seen as an important role in post-colonial society. According to the myth of Africa, Africa was portrayed as a dangerous, primitive and ‘Dark continent’. Through hybridity and feminist mimicry, this stereotype is subverted.

Sibande portrays Sophie as different to the stereotypical view of the maid. By assimilating signs as power, such as the heraldic crest and elaborate dress, the artist seems to be espousing a post-colonial perspective; identity is no longer defined by a clear self/other distinction. The myth of beauty is criticised by the artist, because she portrays a strong, independent person who does not conform to the ideal, in the context of fashion ‘imagery’ in Wish you were here (figure 3.3). It is not an idealised female form as seen in the mass media of consumer society, and as embraced by post-feminism; she reacts in this way against the stereotyping of women as consumer and sex objects in consumer society. Sibande has appropriated the notion of domesticity and transformed it into an empowering image.
Sibande uses the female figure to demonstrate her views on women, their role, identity and position in society. Sophie does not conform to the stereotypical view of a maid. The connotation can be made that she has broken free of the restrictions imposed on her by patriarchy and colonial rule. The story of Sophie is the story of progress made in the position of black women in South African society.

In own practical work I deal with embroidery and the influences of embroidery produced by South African black women. Similar thematic concerns are located in the portrayal of women’s role in society and the way that Mntambo and Sibande react to this aspect in selected artworks. My work, like the artwork of Mntambo and Sibande deals with the female body and identity.

In all the analysed artworks myths and ideologies were identified regarding women’s roles in society. The artists subvert the stereotypical representations of women in society, using post-colonial and third wave feminist discourse.

The method of a semiotic analysis of the artworks made the identification of different ideologies and myths in the artworks possible. The method of the study, of doing a literature study of semiotics, feminism and post-colonialism, provided background information to be considered in the analysis of the artworks. It gave insight into the way that women are viewed in feminist and post-colonial theory and could be applied in the analysis of the artworks. The analysis of the works by Mntambo and Sibande strengthened my view of the role of women in society and their identities. In my own work the importance of a woman’s identity is also reflected, as well as the fact that women have different roles to play in society. It is
also a critique against the ideology of patriarchy which prescribes accepted roles for women.

A delimitation in this study was that only two artworks by each artist were analysed. A more comprehensive study of the artwork of the artists will give a wider perspective and a more in-depth semiotic analysis. Further possibilities for research include a semiotic analysis of all the art of Mntambo and Sibande. A possible aspect for future research is a semiotic analysis of the representation of women as consumer objects in visual media.

In conclusion, it can be said that the artworks analysed reflect an opposition towards the ideology of patriarchy and the domination of women by men. It also becomes clear that the artists subvert the stereotypical view of women from the ideology of colonialism, as well as the representation of women as consumer objects within the ideology of consumerism. Although the portrayal of women in the artworks differ vastly, a unified view of women as dignified beings, as independent individuals who are in control of their own lives, are represented. Although a woman plays the prescribed roles for womanhood, she still remains an individual with unique characteristics, as well as having her own viewpoints, independent of society’s views.

Women occupy a unique place within society. Through the ages their person and position were in many instances ignored, belittled, undermined or oppressed. The female artists that were investigated in this study have done womanhood proud in their portrayal of women as individuals who deserve respect and recognition in society.
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