

THEATRICALITY AS A STRATEGY IN PIETER HUGO'S *HYENA AND OTHER MEN* AND NOLLYWOOD PHOTOGRAPHS

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Abstract

*This article looks at the concept of theatricality in two of Pieter Hugo's photographic projects in Nigeria titled *The Hyena and Other Men* and *Nollywood*. In *The Hyena and Other Men* photos I explore how theatricality allows a particular exposition of the sitter through which a sense of self is constructed. I make a theoretical argument as to how theatricality as an analytical tool can help us unpack subjectivity as performance in portrait photographs, and assist in investigating this pictorial space in which the self is constituted. Here that Hugo enacts theatricality as a mobile device that is devoid of the visible audience. In *Nollywood* I show that Hugo produces violence as the possible and the impossible. I also show that he dramatizes violence as the unresolved. The reading of violent theatricality takes me into an investigation of the significance of props used in the photographs such as guns, whips, blood, and knives and how Hugo deploys them in depicting violence.*

Key words: Theatricality, Nollywood, Pieter Hugo, South Africa, Nigeria.

Brief note on background

In 2008 I attended Pieter Hugo's show titled *Mussina/Messina* at the Iziko South Africa Gallery, in Cape Town. This provocative show stimulated my interest to investigate Hugo's formal devices. On August 3 2008, as a student of Museum and Heritage Studies at the University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa, I invited Hugo to my curated art exhibition at the Cape Africa Platform in August of 2008. I also informed him of my desire to interview him on his formal style and some of his projects in Nigeria. He attended my show where we scheduled an interview in the next two days. Part of this article emerges from this interview.

Born in South Africa in 1976, Pieter Hugo was given a camera by his father at the age of 13 (Pieter Hugo, author's interview, Cape Town, 2010). With this camera he claims to have satisfied his picturesque curiosity of the world around him as a teenager. By age 24, Hugo had already started working as a freelance documentary photographer for some newspaper agencies. He had also started travelling on official assignments to some African countries, including Rwanda.

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By year 2000, he quit photojournalism and according to him, “took photography as a preoccupation” (Pieter Hugo, author’s interview, Cape Town, 2010).

Since 2000 Hugo has undertaken personal photographic projects in many countries including Nigeria, Liberia, Rwanda, Ghana, South Africa, among others. It is remarkable that among all the countries Hugo has visited for his projects, Nigeria seems to spark the necessary dynamism and the energy needed to sustain his creativity.¹He states:

I really like Nigeria and I love the energy that one finds in Nigeria. There is a real, kind of cardinal desire for people to go out and do it and they do it with conviction. I find this very interesting. There is a certain boldness one needs when one meets people and after that I find Nigerians incredibly engaged. Nigeria is a hard place to work but whenever I leave Nigeria I always leave there feeling incredibly stimulated with a lot of food for thought (Pieter Hugo, author’s interview, Cape Town, August 2010).

Between 2005 and 2009, Hugo visited Nigeria on several occasions and undertook two photographic projects namely *The Hyena and Other Men* and *Nollywood*. These two projects have unarguably earned him greater international visibility as a photographer, although not without a corresponding critical responses (see, for example Ikheloa, 2010).² In this article, I examine these two projects and how Hugo enacts theatricality among the human and animal figures.

It has been remarked elsewhere that Hugo's work reacts against the culture of realism that defined South African photography in the apartheid years. Hugo himself notes that during the apartheid years that "people were so engrossed with photography that little room was given to its intersection with the art object. Photographers usually sat within a liberal camp and used their skills to articulate the political reality – anything less was thought frivolous" (Pieter Hugo, author’s interview, Cape Town, August 2010). I suggest, contrary to Hugo’s statement above, that his style does not totally preclude the socio-political and economic dynamics of post apartheid or post-colonial state. This is because his photographs bring the “materiality of political and urban marginalization to the fore” (Magge 2010:120)³ whether in South Africa or Nigeria. It seems that the post-colonial cities in Nigeria where Hugo set his two projects and the apartheid cities in his home country are all defined by exclusion.

Historically, Hugo's formal style may resonate in the works of older generation South African photographers such as David Goldblatt, Santu Mofokeng and Zwelethu Mthethwa (Hayes, 2009; Firstenberg, 2001).⁴ Both Hugo and his South African predecessors such as Goldblatt and Mthethwa have used portraits as a formal device to engage this crisis of exclusion in the city. Hugo's uniqueness lies in his ability to extend his gaze beyond portraits of South Africans to that of West Africans. Quite indisputably, some of Hugo's most engaging photographs come from his series in West Africa including Nigeria, Liberia and Ghana. In so doing, he seems to disrupt the terms of engagement that increasingly situate South African photographers within the specific discourse of South African exceptionalism.

The Hyena and Other Men

Hugo shot *The Hyena and Other Men* project in two visits in Nigeria between 2005 and 2007. Set in some of the most populated cities in Nigeria such as Lagos and Kano, the project covers thirty-three portraits of men, monkeys, rock pythons and one little child from Nigeria. The men make daily living by displaying and performing in the Nigerian cities with hyenas, monkeys and the rock pythons before a crowd of onlookers who make generous donations of money to them and buy their herbs. With the *The Hyena & Other Men* series Hugo made a quantum leap to the international stage.

In *The Hyena and Other Men*, Hugo tacitly enacts the cosmopolitan simulations of crisis and dislocation that inhere in individuals' struggles to survive the disorder and harshness of the postcolonial African city. The project was inspired by a photo emailed to Hugo by a Nigerian friend of a group of men walking down a Lagos street with chained hyenas.... "I was interested in the ambiguous relationship between the men, their beasts and the "outsider" viewer: it makes you to wonder who is taming who?" (Pieter Hugo, author's interview, Cape Town, August 2010). According to Hugo, "I travelled with the group from Ogere-Remo to Bar Beach at Victoria Island in Lagos, and watched as scores of fascinated people were entranced by the spectacle of the hyenas, monkeys, and snakes being paraded through the streets" (Hugo in Abiola 2007:8). However, Hugo decided to avoid this "scores of fascinated people" and focus his lens on the men and their animals.

I liken this 'scores of fascinated people' to the audiences of a performance. By excluding them, I suggest that Hugo enacts a theatricality that is devoid of the

audience. Samuel Weber argues that “theatricality demonstrates its subversive power when it abdicates the margins of the *theatron* and begins to wander” (2004:37). Joseph Litvak (1992: xii) remarks that theatricality unlike ‘theatre’ does not denote a fixed place but rather resists delimitation. In the absence of the audience of onlookers, Hugo disrupts the fixed location of the theatre (Compare Weber, 2004). I suggest, following Weber and Litvak, that Hugo enacts theatricality as a mobile position that has multiple and invisible audiences. Jean-Luc Nancy (2006:220-41) implies a shift from representation to exposition, which he connects to subjectivity, by discussing his idea of the subject’s dislocation or ex-position in portraiture (see also Berger, 2000:226).

Nancy’s idea of a shift from representation to ex-position would suggest that Hugo ‘ex-poses’ his figures instead of representing them. Hugo not only ‘ex-poses’ his figures, he re-positions them for a new set of audiences. These new set of audiences include Hugo’s camera lens, and the (in)visible viewers: us. His figures assume double poses. There is a certain inner feeling different from the outer feelings in both the animal and human figures that Hugo’s lens attempt to ‘ex-pose.’ Theatricality seems to allow Hugo to achieve this aim by opening multiple readings of the meanings of violence in the images Hugo depicts.

Theatricality of violence

My analysis of Hugo’s works attempts to add to studies of performed violence from an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural perspective (see for example, Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004; Feldman 2000; Coronil and Skurski 1991; Parkin 1985; Taussig 2004; Skidmore 2003; Taylor 1996, 2003). The focus here is on symbolic violence as ‘theatricalised’ in Hugo’s photographs.

‘Theatricality of violence’ as an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural framework for analysing social relations revolves around the notion of ‘rhetoricity’ as a social, political and cultural intentionality in contested systems of power relations. From a ‘dramaturgical standpoint’ (Turner 1988), the form of presenting a situation (i.e. violence, control, force, power or social accommodation) by actors aiming to create a certain impression on audiences can be viewed as ‘theatricality’ (Goffman 1959). As in the conventions of the ‘theatre’, the purpose of ‘theatricality’ is to activate audiences’ actions. The audiences in the case of Hugo’s *Hyena Men* are those of us who seem to hide under the veil of invisibility to watch the men and their performances. Hugo may have activated our actions by impalpably suggesting to us the roles played

by the props such as the sticks in these performances. These roles are part of what I examine in Hugo's photography.

A deeper dynamic surrounding the Hyena men's performances is necessary for a fuller understanding of theatricality in Hugo's photos. According to Yahaya Ahmadu, one of the hyena men:

When we get to a place, we make the baboons do somersaults, jump on the back of motorcycles and shake people's hands. Those watching are impressed with our animals. Before you know it, naira notes start to fly here and there. Some throw them at the baboons, others give directly. The baboons bring the money to us and we put it in the common till. (Cited in Abiola, 2007:8).

Now what must be observed from Ahmadu's statement is the phrase, "we make the baboons do somersaults." And how do they achieve this? In my interview with Hugo he reveals to me that the men hit the baboons and the hyenas on the heads with heavy sticks to 'make' them do what they want. The question therefore is why Hugo again avoided these violent performances and instead decided to produce the violence of these men in a seemingly impalpable and invisible form? I suggest that while the real performances of the Hyena Men are enacted for the visible audiences, Hugo's photographic performances are enacted for the invisible audiences (us). And to fully understand the theatricality of violence in Hugo's photographs, one may listen to Abdullahi: "We use heavy sticks to hit the monkeys and hyenas on the head when they misbehave...we knock them down on the ground. All of us hold the sticks in case the animals become aggressive."

In Figure 4.1, the monkey screams violently on sighting the raised stick. This is because the monkey recognizes the meaning of the raised stick which is an invitation to violent flogging. Then in Figure 4.2 while the stick lies on the floor the monkey remains still, perhaps in recognition of the fact that the stick will be deployed at any moment by Usman. This is suggestive of Hayes' metaphor of 'violence is in the knowing' (2009: 37) which I shall come back to. One observes the presence of similar stick lying between Usman's feet and the floor in figures 4.2, 4.3, and 4. 4. It raises the question of why Hugo decided to show the stick in almost all the photos. What could have happened if he avoided the visual presence of sticks?



Figure 4.1. Pieter Hugo, Hyena Men Alhaji Hassan with Ajasco, Ogere-Remo, Nigeria 2007.

Courtesy: www.michaelstevenson.com



Figure 4.2. Pieter Hugo, UmoruMurtala with School Boy, Asaba, Nigeria 2007.

Courtesy: www.michaelstevenson.com



Figure 4.3. Pieter Hugo, *Hyena and other Men, DayabaUsman with the monkey, Clear, Nigeria, 2007*. Courtesy: www.michaelstevenson.com

Nollywood: Hugo on improvisation and 'organic shooting'

The Nollywood video in Nigeria has inarguably emerged as the Hollywood of Africa. Although the term is of unknown origin, it is derived from Hollywood in the same manner as Bollywood in the Indian film industry. While it is believed that Nollywood is the third largest movie industry in the world, after Hollywood and Bollywood, it is seen as the most prolific. With an average of between 1000 and 1,500 movies per year and an estimated \$350m annual turnover, "it has garnered a huge audience that are spread far beyond Nigeria's borders - extending across Africa and the entire black diasporas" (Highet, 2010:18). "Around 700,000 VCDs are pressed daily in Lagos, and crates of these films leave on planes every day, making Nigeria one of the leading digital media content producers, and Nollywood one of Nigeria's most important exports after oil" (Saro-Wiwa, 2009: 5).

In what Appadurai calls "global localities" and "grassroots globalization," (Cited in Okome 2002:320) Nollywood emerged in Nigeria in the 1990s as a mode of cultural production to show that in Kwame Anthony Appiah's words that "African productivity grows apace" despite the politics of 'centre' which seems to place Africa forever at the 'periphery'. According to Okome

(2009:321),Nollywood responds to “eccentric currents of modernity” by engaging in “complex interplay of economic and cultural needs.”

Inspired by the Nollywood industry, Hugo travelled to Nigeria in 2008 and photographed his own version of Nollywood movies. He recruited few individuals and they engaged in what he describes as “organic shooting of Nollywood” (Pieter Hugo, author’s interview, Cape Town, August 2010).

Intending to show an artificial, theatricalised version of Nollywood through his lens, people misunderstood these photos, in certain quarters, as “perpetuating an image of Africa as a space of abject poverty and of theatrical display for a Western art market” (Garb, 2011:6; Witt, 2010: 20). Emily Witts remarks that Hugo’s photographs are unsettling not,

Only because they evoke some of the symbols of nineteenth-century colonial racism (the “horrid faces” and “grotesque masks” of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* come to mind). They also seem to gather and exaggerate other leitmotifs of darkest Africa common to contemporary European and American news coverage of the continent: a chaos of rape, violence, child soldiers and plague, heightened through the editorial fondness for “local color” (2010:20).

Hugo seems to deploy *Nollywood* to (re)claim the popular and imagined narratives of the everyday in the postcolonial cities of Nigeria. While his approach seems blunt and enigmatic, and sometimes shocking, he has refused and resisted certain stylistic labelling attributed to colonial stereotypical photography. He, however, stresses the genuineness, “sincerity and honesty of his sensibility and preoccupation” (Pieter Hugo, author’s interview, Cape Town, August 2010; see also Hugo, 2011:15). He insists he was rather interested in how people who engage in Nollywood movies picture themselves:

Firstly something that was interesting when I met people working in Nollywood as actors was that I wanted to encounter their sufferings and the kind of level at which Nollywood has been picturing itself with the garishness and the over dramatic happenings . On the other hand I looked at Hollywood, and questioned their average displays which are all about bomb explosions, visual garishness and crimes. Perhaps theirs could be more refined because they have larger budgets but basically their preoccupations are similar with Nollywood (Pieter Hugo, author’s interview, Cape Town, August 2010; See also Hugo in Saro-Wiwa, 2009).⁵

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Hugo concludes that “these people at certain occasions appreciate the attention they receive when somebody acknowledges what they do” (Pieter Hugo, author’s interview, Cape Town, August 2010). Going by his statement it seems that Hugo’s mannered theatricality clearly manifests in his role as a conscious narrator, employing a deliberate construction of prototypical *Nollywood* props and humans, to guide us through the chaos, crisis, joys and sorrows of contemporary home-spun economy in Nigeria. Almost echoing Hugo’s viewpoint, Okeke-Agulu argues that Hugo’s critics ignore the fact that he (Hugo) “point to more complex questions about the relationship between creativity and patronage, between the proliferating imagination of makeup artists and the possibilities of a visual and filmic rhetoric often derived from popular lore and firmly dedicated to mass entertainment” (OkekeAgulu, 2010, <http://chikaokeke-agulu.blogspot.com/search?q=Ikhide+>). However, Okeke-Agulu emphasizes the inattention by critics to Hugo’s formal choices and methods which make use of lighting to achieve an interplay of realism and dark fantasy contributing to the production of shock of the images (Ibid). The production of shock emanates in most of the photos from Hugo’s deployment of an “ochre background to depict post-urban Africa” (Stocchi, 2008:378). Ochre coloured background, as against vivid colours, suggest an intention to mirror the tattered colours of ruin and crisis characteristic of post-colonial cities in Nigeria.

Featuring actors dressed as mummies and wielding machetes, Ak-47s and other weapons with blood dripping from their fangs, witch doctors and gun-toting outlaws, Hugo successfully produced a theatricalised version of *Nollywood* and regrets that instead of reading his work as such, “people read it as if it was meant to be a realistic portrayal of the Nigerian film industry” (Pieter Hugo, author’s interview, Cape Town, August 2010). However, Witts believes that the works are not insightful of *Nollywood* movies.

The predominant narrative in *Nollywood* involves a reinvention of “social consciousness by tapping the fears expressed in the city and a reaffirmation of the content of rumour mills and other media, including newspaper and television” (Okome, 2002:324; Okwori, 2003; Haynes, 1997; Haynes and Okome, 1997). There is a complex drift of imagination and myth-making in *Nollywood* in which the viewers are constantly held spellbound by a world of make-believe (Barrot, 2009; Saul and Austen 2010). There is an appropriation of spectacular magic, simulated ostentation and imagined cultural setting which are all part of the capitalist commodification of the system. The market strategies of *Nollywood* lies in this new fantasy and sentimentalities of a bewildered and

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fictitious world imposed upon the viewer's gaze as a representation of the everyday. The internalization of such narratives implodes in the viewers as a totality of the debacle inherent in the modern society.

Hugo's Nollywood project builds into the improvisation of the Nollywood video industry itself. It also builds into the paradigm that characterizes life in the city. For example, Hugo admits that during his photographic shooting of Nollywood in Nigeria, improvisation was mainly deployed as an alternative strategy. He said they always had an initial plan of a venue but most often the venues were not available and they devised expedient spaces. In Figure 5 he says, "as we were walking we saw a heap of rubbish and then I said why don't we stay here and then there it goes, we shot the photo" (Pieter Hugo, author's interview, Cape Town, August 2010). This improvisation constitutes what Hugo describes as "organic process" in his Nollywood project. An example of this process is confirmed in figure 5 where Hugo admits that the children in this photo were not part of the initial plan:

Well the interesting thing is that the children were not supposed to be in the picture. They showed up. When I was busy taking the pictures of the men they formed a sort of curious onlookers. We were about taking the pictures and these kids staying next door were hanging out around us. They kept on creeping into the picture and then we said why don't we acknowledge their presence? (Pieter Hugo, author's interview, Cape Town, August 2010).

Hugo's style leads us inexorably to an understanding of his Nollywood photographs as embodying an array of meanings, some evident and put there purposefully by him, some only tentatively suggested or actively veiled, and many not intended but occurred by happenstance. His methods parallel theatricality and allude to the contingencies that define Nollywood industry itself.

Theatricality of the possible and the impossible violence

In her book on *Theatricality* Elizabeth Burns (1972), argues that theatricality occurs when behaviour is constructed according to a kind of grammar of rhetorical and authenticating conventions rather than being spontaneous. Okeke-Agulu (2010) seems to link Hugo's works to the "visual rhetoric" of Nollywood. Theatricality of the possible and the impossible in Hugo's Nollywood, I suggest, can be understood as calculated, affected, or studied social

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behaviour, as well as the place from which one sees, as designated by the Greek word *theatron*. The term denotes a form of social role-playing in order to achieve a particular effect on a viewer. If we are the viewers of both Hugo's *Nollywood* and *Hyena Men* photographs then we have participated in enacting the impossible in the figures' performances.

Judith Butler ascribes notion of subjectivity as a construct that is itself a performative process. For Butler, the role of the self is performed not self-consciously in order to achieve a certain effect, but the 'you' to whom the performance is addressed is essential for the subject to recognize him or her as self. However, for Hugo, his relationship with his figures is such that the violent figures perform self-consciously and achieves an effect that is pre-meditated. If, according to Grootenboer (2010: 323), theatre "is a medium of dislocation and estrangement rather than absorption" then Hugo enacts theatricality whose force lies in dislocation and estrangement rather than absorption. Hugo's forte, I suggest, lies in the facial gazes of his figures which have been dislocated from critical areas of engagements. The gazes are undeviating, fixed and determined. Again these gazes are occasioned by the presence of Hugo's lens and the viewers (us) who compel the figures to look frontally.

Figure 4.4 seems to encapsulate the drama of possibility and impossibility. The boy carries the girl who looks like his victim. The boy's mouth which is a bit ajar exposes Dracula-like teeth projections steeped in blood. His eyes are also reddish and accentuate the mysteriousness around him. The girl lie helpless on his legs with her head resting on his left hand and eyes closed in either a dead or trance-like mood. There is a smudge of blood around her neck. Her face also depicts some well trimmed eye-lashes and lips painted in red. She is dressed in a 'traditionally' tailored outfit with bangles around her wrist.



Figure 4.4

Pieter Hugo, *Izunna Onwe and Uju Mbamalu*, Enugu, Nigeria. 2008.

Courtesy: www.michaelstevenson.com

What is important in this photograph is the formal presentation of the figure. Hugo allows his figures to look directly at the lens, and at us. Following these frontal convention he (Hugo) “looks direct, and that it is confrontational, in terms of confronting the viewer, and dealing with your subjects face to face, engaging with them, collaborating with them” (Lehan, 2008). In fact, it will be more reasonable to suggest that Hugo’s photographs employ the frontal technique as “mnemonics that prompt people to talk about events, people, and social relations, going beyond what is shown” (Ibid). This is akin to the project of theatricality which elicits deeper feelings from humans and prompts them to respond in similar manner.

Hugo employs theatricality in an overly preposterous manner by pronouncing the visual loudness of the gaze, by looking directly at the viewer (us). In this way he compels us towards a deeper engagement with the images by contemplating the limits of the possible and impossible in human existence. On first confrontation with

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his photographs, the sudden shock one feels, I suggest, is part of this compelling possible/impossible instantiations that the images evoke. This shock may not be felt in less visually disconcerting images. This shock enables multiple readings of possibilities and impossibilities into the work.

While one may argue that the existence of certain strange figures in Hugo's Nollywood photos may not be totally impossible, his photos suggest that the impossible can also become possible in the daily theatricality of violence. Hugo argues that "certain types of violence thought impossible and shocking happens in actual human experience" (Pieter Hugo, author's interview, Cape Town, August 2010). In figure 6 the male figure poses with the cognition of the camera while the viewers also recognize this cognition. In this way, there is a test of the limits of the communal game of make-believe in which the storyteller (Hugo) and the audience (us) help in plotting the impossible. In performing violence, this figure is terrifyingly caught between reality and illusion.

In figure 4.5 there are four figures, a man with brutally burnt flesh. He raises and points a rifle to the sky with his right hand. There are three children: one at the left hand side of the man and the other two at the right hand side. The interesting part of this photograph is the gazes of the four human figures. The gazes, quite connotatively, raise a lot of questions: is it possible that the children would remain unperturbed beholding such a violent figure? In interrogating the theatricality of the impossible violence, the first question is whether the scar and the degree of burns on the man's flesh are painless as to keep him alive, strong and combat ready? The photograph gravitates between reality and hyper-reality.



Figure 4.5. Pieter Hugo, Nollywood Series, *Song Iyke with Ebube, Thank God and Mpompo*, Enugu, Nigeria, 2008. Courtesy: www.michaelstevenson.com



Figure 4.6.

Pieter Hugo, MallamGaladimmaAhmadu, Hyena Men. 2007.

Courtesy: www.michaelstevenson.com

The question is how does a concern with Hugo's theatricality reveal that which is fundamentally impossible in photography. Is there something within Hugo's theatricality that raises a concern with photographic possibilities? In my interview with him, Hugo admits that he "is interested in the unresolved aspects of violence in human existence." He argues that "the honesty of Nollywoodas against Hollywood is its ability to speak to the unresolved tragedies of the human life" (Pieter Hugo, author's interview, Cape Town, August 2010). In contemplating this statement, figure 4.7 draws attention to Rose and how her violence is still unresolved. This is where the theatricality of violence lies. Rose wears a mild smile even as the knife penetrates her belly and protrudes through her back. While this photograph also re-enacts the photographic possibilities/impossibilities, it highlights the unresolved aspects of violence in human existence.



Figure 4.7.

Pieter Hugo, Rose Njoku, Enugu, Nigeria 2008.

Courtesy: www.michaelstevenson.com

The theatricality of violence in the photograph would have been acted out more compellingly in Nollywood video movies where expressions of loud scream and body languages usually parallel the enormity of bodily harm inflicted upon victims. Many Nigerians have denounced Nollywood for being unreasonably and preposterously loud. This loudness arises from the quest to provide a commensurate level of response for certain degrees of violence. It suggests that Rose needs to scream and reel on the floor to satisfy the expectancy of the teeming Nollywood viewers who would expect a corresponding hysterical response to her extreme violence.

On the contrary, with Rose's emotional impassivity in the face of intense bodily harm, the photo provokes a counter image of Nollywood movies. It belies the characterization of Nollywood by defying the loud scream that follows intense bodily affliction. Indeed as Makhubu (2013:56) has argued "Hugo's work doesnot seem to represent a deafening loudness but rather the inabilityto converse." In this Rose's inability to converse in the midst of intense bodily violence, there is a tension between the possible and the impossible. According to Hugo, "people die slowly and silently as a result of acts of violence. It is possible. People are knifed silently and they die bearing the blood and the invisible acts of knifing" (Pieter Hugo, author's interview, Cape Town, August 2010). The fact of

this image is that theatrical violence is acted daily on the silent lips of humans; it is possible and invisible at the same time.

On Theatricality: the significance of hands, guns, knife, blood and sticks: who sees what?

The question here is what both the figures in Hugo's photographs see and what the spectators see. By the spectators I mean those of us watching Hugo's photos. Jean Luc-Nancy (2006:222) has argued that "the exclusive concern of the portrait is a self in and for itself" (See also Woodall, 1997).⁶ I suggest that Hugo, as well as his models, developed ways of articulating the exposition of bodily self as a means of constituting the figure's duality. The recognition of self can occur only through a mediation that takes place exterior to the self. This mediation, which is not interiorized in Hugo's projects, I suggest, is profoundly theatrical. In this theatricality the figures see the spectators and the camera while the spectators (us) see the weapons of war.

All the hands in figures 4.5, 4.6, 4.7 are clutching unto dangerous weapons and even the hand in figure 4.6 clutches unto the wild animal's mouth. The animal's mouth, however, poses great danger to the figure's fingers. Now, in most of Hugo's photos, instead of gazing at the points and areas where their hands and bodies face high risk of physical harm, the figures gaze at the camera lens. This is very important in the visual analysis of the figures' and Hugo's quest to dramatize violence. There is a high degree of self awareness both on the part of the human figures, the monkeys and Hugo himself. This self-awareness engenders discrepancies between the human figures' inner appearance and that of their outward sense of dramatizing the violent. It initiates duality. Makhubu (2013: 56) has argued that "While the inclusion of weapons makes those that are portrayed appear as perpetrators of violence, it also ambiguously casts them as victims". They appear profoundly wounded." She further notes that " Even if we are aware that the blood and scars are not real, we are reminded of deeper psychologically transmuted, politically provoked and socially aggravated wounds." Makhubu's remarks attests to a realization that the figures' inner feelings of risk are mitigated by the courage of their outer selves in displaying violence. On the contrary the monkey's inner feelings of risks are aggravated by the dangers posed by the weapons. The weapons, however, are staged as part of the human figures' violent theatricalities. In figure 4.5, for example, there is a harmony in the upward movement of both the stick and the monkey: while the man raises the stick the monkey makes a corresponding upward leap and

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screams. A nuanced interpretation of this photograph might compel us to invoke Hayes' metaphor of "the violence is in the knowing." Hayes' exploration of SantuMofokeng's photographs allows her to understand violence as a phenomenon which transcends the human sight. And violence as that which "derives from the fact that there are knowledges attached to seeing" (2009:37). Therefore the violence that we do not see in this photo is seen by the monkey who knows the meaning of the raised stick as an invitation to violent flogging. A violence that constitutes our 'unknowing' manifests as the monkey's 'knowing' and compels it to jump.

We might choose to read the props such as the knife, blood, sticks, and guns as the forte of Hugo's *Nollywood* and *Hyena and Other Men* projects. It is possible that Hugo's projects might not have conveyed such visual force were all these elements absent. The weapons have a way of eliciting spontaneous emotions from both the monkeys and the spectators (us). The weapons may aim to impress the spectators (us) but invariably they may have succeeded in shocking us and threatening the monkeys.

The Spectators and the Spectacle

While, in the confined time and space of the theatre, spectacle and spectator need to be in each other's vicinity in order for the theatrical event to take place, the pictorial scene of Hugo's photos does not require its audience to be present. In Weber's words, we may say that theatricality has started to wander. The fundamental disjunction of theatrical photograph, or rather its paradox, is played out by Hugo in masterly fashion through the *The Hyena and Other Men* and *Nollywood* photos where the spectators and the spectacle mean different things to different peoples.

In this section, therefore, I draw on Michael Fried's engagement with the problems of the relationship between the spectator and a painting, and the comparable relation of audience and actors in the theatre, to explore Hugo's photographic works. It is necessary to state that the development of photography theory needs to be considered in line with the influence of miscellaneous topical preoccupations in the humanities. In doing this I suggest that fruitful theoretical questions could emerge in photography studies if authors explore broad thematic areas in the field of art criticisms, literary criticisms and theatre.

Michael Fried's (1980) study is structured around an analysis of manifestations of the changing painting-beholder relationship as found in art and criticism of the eighteenth century French art. He argues that an awareness of this relationship amongst artists, as echoed by critics, determined the development of French art through the eighteenth century and beyond. Fried invokes the metaphor of 'absorption' to explore the 1750s paintings by Chardin, Carle Vanloo and Vien which according to him, present straightforward instances of absorption – that is, pictures where the figures are noticeably unaware of any spectator. This is being accentuated by their 'absorption' in some corresponding activities of either reading, sewing, or paying attention to another element in the photo. In this way the figures refuse to acknowledge the spectator (us).

Considering this style in relation to Hugo's photos one can argue that Hugo's human figures acknowledge the spectators (us) by concentrating on the lens and what they want the spectators to view.

Fried considers 'Absorption' an important quality in the painting-beholder relationship of mid eighteenth century French paintings. Fried provides the most pertinent articulation of views regarding the seriousness of a painting's figural elements. Seriousness connotes the (un)consciousness of the beholder (the figure in the artwork). That is, within the photos figures regard their scenes with seriousness and neglect their spectator. For Fried, "the most significant aspect of absorption is its exclusivity: the figures' attention is so wrapped up in their own activities that they have no time for us (spectators)" (Fried, 1980:13). Comparing this model to Hugo's photos I suggest that the dynamic is reversed as this exclusivity becomes more central in the photos because of the theatrical style of the figures. This time Hugo's figures recognize and focus more attention on us (the spectators) rather their own activities. This is why the gazes are directed at us instead of the areas of critical risks of the images and their hands.

Conclusion

Hugo's projects, no doubt, prompts to a more pointed social and cultural reckoning of the post independence Nigeria. I have shown that even though Hugo's deployment of sticks dramatizes violence, the presence of the sticks, at the same time, initiates a double consciousness inside the human figures that deploy them. We (the spectators) help in enacting the theatricality of violence among the figures who feign ignorance of the risks posed by the violence they enact.

I have exposed Hugo's Nollywood project as part of his attempts to acknowledge the fortunes and tribulations of the industry. Through this method he engages theatrical violence as an important aspect of popular media industry. He theatricalises violence as the possible and impossible, and also as the unresolved aspects of human existence. His method constructs the postcolonial everyday as an act of rumour mongering, make belief, magic and other performativities that also sustains the real Nollywood industry.

Hugo's figures' actions appear self-conscious, too obviously calculated and mannered. This attitude never vitiated the force and power of the scene enacted. Peering through Hugo's shocking images, we participate in a theatrical piece of his photographic devising. His works enact a violent theatricality that evolves a progressively more detailed and informed understanding of the photographic process. I liken the figures to actors and actresses of a Nollywood movie. However, while in the original Nollywood movie, most often, actors and actresses feign ignorance of the spectators or audiences, Hugo's figures take full cognition and acknowledgement of the presence of the spectators through a frontal gaze. Yet, their actions do not undermine the strength of the images.

Notes

1. In my interview with Hugo he states that he found Nigeria fascinating in stimulating his visual insights and that he loves Nigeria for the challenges it poses for his visual projects. He claims to enjoy such challenges which he claims he has never seen in any other African country he worked. Interview with Pieter Hugo, Cape Town, October 2008.
2. One of the photos of *the Hyena and Other Men* won Hugo the prestigious KLM Paul Huf Award in 2008. For some polemical responses regarding his photos see for example, Ikhidelkheola, "The women of Pieter Hugo's Nollywood," *234 next Newspaper*, June 21, 2010, p.20.
3. Carol Magee has used this term to describe the works of Zwelethu Mthethwa, who also adopts a parallel visual formula as Hugo by showing portraits of the underprivileged in urban dwellings.
4. Hugo has confessed to me that he was greatly influenced by David Goldblatt.
5. This sentiment is also shared eventually by ZinaSaro-Wiwa in 2009 in Hugo's second Nollywood project long after my interview in 2008

regarding his first Nollywood project in 2007. Wiwa believes that Hugo's *Nollywood* discountenances the highly funded allegorical films and Marxist cinematic epics that have fundamentally excluded Africa's popular audience.

6. Joanne Woodall (1997) has also attributed the rise of portraiture in Western Europe to the effect of the self-consciousness of the sitter, see Joanna Woodall, 'Sovereign bodies: the reality of status in seventeenth century Dutch portraiture', in Joanna Woodall, ed., *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, Manchester, 1997, 75-100.

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