

The Challenge of Reality in Pieter Hugo's Photography

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Introduction

This essay critically interrogates the disturbing 'nature' of Pieter Hugo's works, by attempting to go beyond their cursory views to read other meanings into these visual presentations and at the same time try to situate them within the bounds of both art and social documentary photography. Through this enquiry, the artist is presented as one who is involved in a social crusade which is manifested in his obvious attempt to unveil inequality in human existence and perhaps society's cold indifference to the plight of the less privileged thereby presenting Hugo as an artist and social documentary photographer. This essay attempts to posit that "the condemnation of images on the basis of formal artistic properties"¹ may be merely simplistic; and that "representations are not objective nor are the meanings of images... encoded in, or intrinsic to, the photographs, the type or format of the cameras, even subjects, but are instead shaped by the visual tropes of the culture that views the images."² The claims to authenticity and truth are also part of other meanings this essay wishes to read into Hugo's photographs.

In precise terms, this essay sees Hugo in the realm of art and social documentary photography. It evaluates the tension between them by arguing that reality as presented to us is most often simulated.

Hugo the Social Documentary Photographer

Beholding the severe looks of Pieter Hugo's portraits, we encounter nothing short of an attempt to confront the viewer with a shocking sensation. The mixture of elements of weird physicality and individuality creates a vision of somewhat singularity to Hugo's photography. A viewer already acquainted with Hugo's oeuvres would immediately notice its constant reference to Africa's disturbing social, political and economic structures ranging from allusions to South Africa, Nigeria, Malawi, Ghana, Liberia, Rwanda among others. But on the other hand, an unfamiliar observer is subject to a plethora of speculations on the works regarding their definitive constancy to a certain style of representation. Focusing mainly on the poor, the sick, the marginal community, the troubled, Hugo's style seem to have supported the view that "Photography established itself as part of a tradition of enquiry into the health, housing, education, economic condition and moral state of the poor".³ But when viewed from the context of simulated imageries one may then pardon the very provocative verities these photographs evoke.

A strict observation of the photographs shows Hugo as the director and controller of the sitter's world. Again another close look seems to suggest that truth after all may be entirely lost in his search for extraordinary existence. He obviously has an empathy with his models most of whom he recruits from the streets and the underworld. His strategies involve a pre-meditation and long term ground plan just like a painter taking sketches in readiness for a painting composition. Furthermore, some of the pictures may denote a masking of intentionality and the contexts need not be speculated upon for Hugo himself has the final say. Even if any speculation should be offered it must be within the confines of the prevailing circumstances of the moment in the photographs. I propose

this, because "the nature of an image itself is not enough to classify a particular photograph as in some essential way documentary; rather we need to look at the contexts, practices, institutional forms, within which the work is set".⁴ This is also true as Patricia Hayes has noted that "photography should not be studied in isolation"⁵ and as Mary Price has also suggested that "there are no single meaning for the photograph, but rather an emergent meaning, within which the subject-matter of the image is but one element".⁶ However, in Hugo's photography dream meets reality, the impossible becomes possible, the emotional engages the frigid, joy encounters sorrow, the comical controls the demure, serenity is misunderstood, the theatrical dissolves into a melodrama, and life's beauty is challenged by ugliness.

South Africa from where Hugo comes from has a history of disturbance. Trite to mention apartheid yet it heralds the beginning of most creative encounters in the country. Starting with Leon Levson, Bob Gosani, Ernest Cole, Constance Larabe, Daniel Morolong, Peter Mugubane and David Goldblatt's epochal adventures in the early years through the 1950's to Santu Mofokeng's later incursions into the realm of photography as art, there emerged a corpus of visual references that should have affected Hugo's stylistics. But the extent they did is yet to be determined given Hugo's different approach. To present a quick analysis, "Bob Gosani secretly photographed the notorious prison practice of *tauza*"⁷ while Ernest Cole's "black and white photographs depict passbook arrests, police inspections, dehumanizing conditions in diamond mines, 'white only' signage in the city- among others"⁸, David Goldblatt's works "represent an Atgetian effort at capturing silences and obscure illustrations of in-between structures, spaces and peoples,"⁹ Peter Magubane also focused on the hectic flurry brewed by the pangs of apartheid . But one distinguishing

quality of all the above mentioned photographers from Hugo is an abundance of kinetic images in their works; a result of the tumult induced by apartheid. On the contrary Hugo's works are hatched in the post apartheid era and thus depict people as bodies of inertia whose movements are only frozen. In other words, the works suggest a quiet disturbance; an uncomfortable immobility that is only but psychological. Most of his works are hungry for movement yet stiffened into quiet discomfort.

Hugo's style of photography has a marked difference from his predecessors because of the face-the camera technique of which some people have likened to colonial stereotypical approach. In a conversation with Hugo, Joanna Lehan remarks that 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"¹⁰. She notes that "that is new in terms of depicting social issues in South Africa."¹¹ Again while majority of his predecessors were mainly concerned with South Africa, Hugo is one of the few South African photographers who have gone around African countries to prove that indeed apartheid may wear different robes in different places. For example the lives of the Hyena men in Nigeria according to Hugo, is worrying because of the "psychological state they operate in. They exist and survive in a place that is neither here nor there... and they survive like this in the most oil-rich country in Africa."¹² But his photographs have questioned the ill treatment of the Hyenas also. According to Hugo, "There were a lot of big sticks and they were used when the animals did not do what they were supposed to. The hyenas are so big they seemed to absorb even the strongest blows to head but the monkeys seemed terrified at times"¹³. Through the photographs international groups also indicated interest in the hyena men. For example,

Hugo has been approached by a director of a large security company in the USA who demanded the contact details of the 'hyena group' because of what he saw as marketing potential in the herbs these men use to protect themselves against hyenas, baboons, dogs and snakes¹⁴. Some other human rights groups have also tried to intervene in the supposed ill treatment of the animals. If viewed from the context of social documentary, therefore, I argue that he (Hugo) has done much to, at least broadcast the voice of this marginalised group to international listeners. In the words of David Levi Straus, "There was a time, at the end of the 1980s, when the critique of documentary photography based on the "aestheticization of suffering" was so influential that it became virtually impossible to defend documentary practice. Any such defense was regarded as at best naïve and at worst ideologically suspect."¹⁵ Citing the 9/11 attack as the most photographed scene in the history of the world, Levi Straus argued that "the attack on the twin tower effectively reset the clock on documentary images clearing away years of accumulated censure."¹⁶ In his analysis of the book, *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain*, Levi Straus remarks:

As its title indicates, *Beautiful Suffering* begins with the controversial critique of aestheticization of suffering in its pursuit of 'alternatives to mainstream photojournalistic ways of representing suffering' with the worthy goal of fostering 'a more reflective awareness of how we represent and address the rampant suffering and the corollary spectatorship that characterize our time'.¹⁷

If photographs of Hugo's suffering humanity are considered along this line then it would be clear that "without scenes of

death, destruction, misery and trauma, the contemporary image environment would be nearly unrecognizable"¹⁸ Lavi Straus also remarks that the editors of *Beautiful Suffering* note that "since 9/11, accounts of trauma have become still more crucial...to the formation of the social bond and the shaping of national identity."¹⁹

However, images of sufferings do not automatically translate to reality if viewed from Hugo's perspective. His style attempts to re-position South Africa from the characteristic frenzy known during the apartheid era to another level of trauma using a technique that is most often exaggerated. Gary Minkley and Ciraj Rassool, while referring to Gordon Metz have noted that "the South African social documentary tradition is shaped and moulded by photographers who through their work and through their actions, chose to side with those who engaged, subverted and resisted colonialism and apartheid."²⁰ Again quoting Metz Minkley and Rassool observe that Levson photographed ordinary people and every day life with the same attention to detail as he devoted to his portraits of the well-to-do.

²¹If Hugo is juxtaposed with Levson then it could also be argued that "his subjects are never treated as passive or exotic specimens"²², but always as "individuals with personas, shaping a social and cultural milieu."²³

Perhaps the meaning to be read in Hugo's images is the style of presenting troubled individuals in a manner that really accentuates their trouble, something close to hyperbole. This style evokes immediate pity and Hugo dramatises this pity in many of the photos. In most of the portraits there is a determination to represent character and individuality. Although one may argue that the photos are painstakingly engaging and that there is a reinforcement of seriousness, it still reflects Hugo's sense of aesthetics in interpreting individuals as psychological entities and victims of social disorder.

Having traveled along with the Hyena men in Nigeria for barely one month in a taxi through one of the most perilous routes in Nigeria, Hugo shared in the dangerous itinerancy these men embark upon daily to maintain a meager livelihood in an oil rich nation. The enthusiasm and courage with which he journeyed along with them speaks of one whose ultimate aspiration goes beyond mere photography as he confirms sharing in their sorrows and disappointments perhaps in confirmation of the fact that "the genuine documentary photographer personally experiences what he captures on film: laughter and tears, joy and sorrow, tragedy and comedy."²⁴ According to Hugo,

I agreed to travel with the animal wranglers to Kano in the northern part of Nigeria. One of them set out to negotiate a fare with a taxi driver; everyone else, including myself and the hyenas, monkeys and rock pythons, hid in the bushes. When their companion signaled that he had agreed on a fare, the motley troupe of humans and animals leapt out from behind the bushes and jumped into the vehicle. The taxi driver was completely horrified. I sat up front with a monkey and the driver. He drove like an absolute maniac. At one stage the monkey was terrified by his driving. It grabbed hold of my leg and stared into my eyes. I could see its fear.²⁵

The above exemplifies a precarious itinerancy that Hugo also partook in, to share in the afflictive fallibility and ambivalence of the life of the marginalised even as he confirms that his biggest fear when working in Nigeria is that he might die in a car accident because of the bad roads and the bad driving.²⁶ Again, the myths that these men are criminals and drug

peddlers were debunked by Hugo as he found absolutely nothing wrong with them.

Hugo the artist

It is interesting that Hugo started as a documentary photographer and ended up as an artist. But the tension between photography and art has long been established from the nineteenth century. Most photographs were later appropriated into artistic usage by institutions. Alan Trachtenberg had noted that "In 1899, 3 years after Brady's death, Alfred Stieglitz announced that something new had appeared in photography- a desire to make art rather than mere photographs".²⁷ And that "with independent means and a dominating, charismatic personality, Stieglitz devoted the rest of his long life to winning the case for photography as a fine art".²⁸ But outside Stieglitz, other factors contributed to this new photography-turned-art fascination. Independent struggles, institutions, critics and academics in realisation of this multiple dimension of photography also quickly sought to interpret photographs as art. However, "exhibitions and categorization confirmed the hegemony in the photographic community of a division between 'art' and 'documentary photography'"²⁹. Most especially, instrumental to the success of this strategy is the "validation of museum and galleries as the ultimate mode of conferring aesthetic value on photography".³⁰ One could conclude, therefore that the conferment of the 2008 young artist of the year award on Hugo by Standard Bank automatically validates his vocation as an artist even though he may not have intended to pursue a vigorous delineation of artist/photographer dichotomy at the inception of his career. On the contrary the conferment of a first prize position in the portraits section of the 2006 World Press Photo award on Hugo at Arles also questions the

distinction between photojournalism and art. This distinction is further questioned by the fact that "in December 2005, *Art Review* identified Pieter Hugo as one of the 100 Artists on the cusp of international success, while *Aperture*, followed by *The New York Times*, included him as 'ReGeneration:50 Photographers of tomorrow.'³¹ According to Elizabeth McCausland:

But at the turn of the century art got mixed with photography. Some inner insecurity of photographers (seduced, perhaps, by commercial appeals and selling talks) led them to precipitate the battle: "Is photograph ART?" Today progressive photographers are not especially interested in the point; it seems an empty issue. There is the whole wide world before the lens, and reality uniting to be set down imperishably.³²

One can therefore submit that the idea of these divisions are formulated through the hegemony of institutions especially by the projects of awards, publications and exhibitions. In what Andy Grundberg describes as the "disjunctions and disparities between artistic meaning and social meanings in photography", the argument could linger as to whether photography could be considered as art and what kind of an art it is³³. Grundberg further questions whether photography is an art like painting or drawing, with the same aesthetic claims and standards, or an art form unto itself, so inextricably interconnected with social and political values that to call it "art" in the conventional sense requires quotation marks?³⁴ And for Jean-Claude Lemagny and Andre Rouille, the question of the extent to which contemporary photography may be regarded as art is no longer relevant, rather what should be examined is the extent to which contemporary art has become

fundamentally marked by photography.³⁵

Charles Baudelaire was among the advocates of the exclusion of photography from art. In the review of the 1859 exhibition by the French Society of Photography, Baudelaire remarked that "if photography is allowed to supplement art in some of its functions, it will soon have supplanted or corrupted it altogether..."³⁶ But it seemed Baudelaire was envisaging a situation whereby photography will take the place of art in all its entirety but again "art has been transformed to such an extent that photographic reproductions could in no way be seen as a challenge to it. Indeed photography is now widely recognized as a major art form."³⁷

However many critiques have emerged in recent years regarding the 'social construction' of disciplines which is not within the scope of this essay. But if we consider the fact that the increased tension between art and photography became continuous with an era when the discipline of visual culture was embroiled in "disciplinary anxieties...territorial grumpiness and defensiveness"³⁸ with other disciplines then it becomes also acceptable that the creation of disciplines breeds controversy and sometimes tussles as to which subject to include or exclude. It begs the question of who has the authority to prescribe. And who knows which is which? W.J.T. Mitchell had elaborated in detail the inherent hodgepodge in the divisions of disciplines and confessed his inability to provide a categorical answer to a corpus of questions arising from the 'visual' disciplines. In his search to construe these distinctions Mitchell concludes:

What, after all, can 'fit' inside the domain of visual studies? Not just art history and aesthetics, but scientific and technical imaging, film, television, and digital media, as well as philosophical inquiries

into the epistemology of vision, semiotic studies of images and visual signs; psychoanalytic investigation of the scopical 'drive,' phenomenological, physiological, and cognitive studies of the visual process, sociological studies of spectatorship and display, visual anthropology, physical optics and animal vision and so forth and so on.³⁹

And if photography is subjected to the above scopical dilemma why should one not classify it under art. I can argue that photography is art given new approach to knowledge known as interdisciplinarity. An interdisciplinary study is an academic program or process seeking to synthesise broad perspectives, knowledge, skills, interconnections, and epistemology in an educational setting. Interdisciplinary programs may be founded in order to facilitate the study of subjects which have some coherence but which cannot be adequately understood from a single disciplinary perspective. The big question is whether photography could be adequately understood from a single perspective or discipline given its multifaceted link to human existence. Mieke Bal observes that "scholars from various disciplines have been able to enter the adjacent field thanks to semiotics, a multidisciplinary methodology..."⁴⁰

It could be advocated that Hugo is an artist because it is observed that photography itself is as unresolved as it is contradictory. And that almost "anything connected with photography is ambiguous".⁴¹ According to David Mills,

Images do not intrinsically contain objective meaning, and must be interpreted through cultural frames and contextual information external to the images"⁴². It could be argued that "there are no neutral ways of producing

images and that the meaning of any given image is a combination of cultural context, the intentions and decisions of the photographer (even if unconscious and cultural) and the subject matter.⁴³

Having observed his sense of aesthetics, I tend to interpret Hugo's works as iconographic visual repertoires of society rather than as what is presented to the viewer. Hugo himself has also attached this iconography to his works in some of his public interviews. For example a uniform seems to be an ordinary uniform which most people know but a symbol of power and in some instances suppression. In analysing Norman Bryson's *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*, Mieke Bal had theorised that "reading iconographically is interpreting visual representation by placing its elements in a tradition that gives them a meaning other than their "immediate" visual appearance suggests."⁴⁴ For example, "a vase of flowers is not merely a vase of flowers: the little insects on the flowers, not merely insects but ...the minuscule, undeniable symptoms of decay...As such they are indices, metonymies; and as metonymies they become the master trope that takes over the entire image."⁴⁵ Bal had added that "the interesting point of iconographic reading though, is not so much the theme that the signs point up, but the signifying force that emanates from those tiny details."⁴⁶ One may then conclude that photographers themselves vacillate between dual vocation of art and photography depending on the circumstances of the moment.

Commonplace thoughts of photos of the less privileged groups and the lower class members of the society are always rooted in stereotype. But beyond this is Hugo's attempt to dramatise the spectacle of human imperfection and existence

notwithstanding the 'categories' involved. As an artist, his inspiration is drawn to the 'underworld' and the darker side of life from where he engages a passive audience into the criticality of the visual image. He connects himself with the social ills of his environment by looking at the troubled ones. His stylistics lie in a commitment to the indigents, the poverty stricken and suffocating claws of the cold society. In my interview with Hugo, I discovered that he has a major influence over the arrangement of his compositions just like a painter over his model. He had remarked:

I would always have some visual references and we would have prior plans of the type of things and people we would want to photograph. Often we had a very short space of time to do the make up, take the photograph and the location that we might have considered using might be unavailable. So we would just walk into the streets and on this occasion we saw a pile of rubbish...⁴⁷

That Hugo makes use of visual references is an attitude akin to art and I advocate the adoption of the word 'model' for both photography and art. Liz Wells has demonstrated the efficacy of this principle when she analysed Peter Galassi's book, *Before Photography*. In this book a comparative study of photographs and paintings within the same genres, reveals continuities in aesthetic convention including compositional similarities⁴⁸. Wells also notes that "photographs not only reproduced Art, they also mirrored Art in making pictures in accordance with established fine art objects."⁴⁹

Hugo's style involves staged photographs depicting a make-believe world. Wells notes that staged photographs depicting idealised or mythical scenes became common from 1859s onwards. She cites examples with Julia Cameron who

invited her friends, family and servants to pose for her, either for portraits or as actors within her dramatic scenarios.⁵⁰ This is also evident in Hugo's portraits where people are invited to pose in a manner that would indicate the intended theme. I can argue that the 19th century marked the radicalism and an overwhelming predominance of what Christopher Pinney calls 'the Inter-ocular.' For example the end of the nineteenth century witnessed the major influence photography had on art and vice-versa. It was also the era of naturalism in theatre and in fact the birth of cinema, and the development of lithographic technique necessary for the mass reproduction of the photographic technique.⁵¹

Interrogating Reality

On this note I wish to question the claims to authenticity by both social documentary photography and art. However both may be criss-crossed or used interchangeably depending on the prevailing factors at the time of use. In other words, when social documentary photographs enter the museum and gallery spaces, they become artworks. They may retain that nomenclature of social documentary or reframed under another caption depending on the curatorial position of the curator.

I start by declaring that postmodern life has engendered a situation whereby both art and photography may have formed part of what Jean Baudrillard calls "society of the simulacrum"⁵² where by the simulacrum of production informs all aspects of life. It suggests the death of authenticity and originality. Shouldn't there be a universal prescription that now identifies all aspects of creativity as production and thus remove them from delusive notions of 'real.'?

Photographs as well as other art forms constitute part of that social consciousness that have failed to distinguish reality from fantasy. Hugo emerges here as a product of post apartheid

South Africa to give new interpretations to the newfangled society that may have lost the photographic appeal of 'a spectacular society'. The underlining argument of this essay is embedded in Hugo's preoccupation with the spectacle and how he demonstrates that "reality can unfold in a new generality as a pseudo-world ...solely as an object of contemplation".⁵³ Guy Debord remarks that the spectacle in its generality is a concrete inversion of life... where deceit deceives itself, the locus of illusion and false consciousness and a situation where truth is a moment of falsehood.⁵⁴ In a sense Hugo's presentations approximate 'reality by proxy' and an emotional engagement that forces the viewer to internalise the artificialities of the 'copy world'. Hugo is involved in visual dissimulation and a hocus pocus that tries to mask the "goal of the dominant mode of production"⁵⁵ thereby revealing that society should be viewed as that which circumvents and hoodwinks and in fact a subterfuge and as something beneath the viewer's gaze. By this Hugo does not want us to have a closure but attempts to find a discourse that would help us chart the passage from the past to the future. He invokes this idiom to inspire insight into the concept of 'the real' using a language that proclaims a new epoch, a language which seems deconstructive and endlessly mesmerising.

Further Interrogations of reality: Some of Hugo's Disturbing Photographs

Genocide: Rwanda

Rwandan Genocide is one of Hugo's earlier photographs that could be viewed from the standpoint of documentary. In April 2004, nearly one million Rwandans were brutally massacred in a killing that could be seen as one of the most gruesome in the 20th century. Some of those killings took place at the Murabi Technical School. In the event of the genocide in

Rwanda, about 50,000 Tutsis and few Hutus took refuge at the technical school in Murambi. The school authorities promised them that the school would be a safe haven from the wanton killings by the genocide militias. The men, women and children endured for two weeks without food or water, hoping to be saved but unfortunately at "3:00 a.m. on April 21st, 1994: Soldiers loyal to the genocide in Rwanda encircled the technical school in Murambi and within 48 hours all but 4 people were massacred; some blown up by grenades, some shot, most hacked to death by machetes"⁵⁶. Emmanuel Murangira, one of four survivors, survived by hiding under the corpse of the dead despite a bullet that struck his head. His family was among the people slaughtered. According to Emmanuel:

On the 21st of April at around 3 am, that was when we heard vehicles, buses, trucks, bringing soldiers, and then the soldiers kind of encircled the whole of the compound and then they started shooting at us, throwing grenades, then killing. — So the killings continued all night from 3am up to around nine in the morning. So in the morning the whole compound was full of dead bodies around here. So you can see I got that bullet wound on my head that very day.⁵⁷

Violence is a theme that has attracted a lot of attention in many genres. Both Hollywood and the growing Nollywood films seem to have commercialised various acts of violence like murder, gang shootings, organised crime and war killings. Little did Hugo think of this in his earlier photographs as something worthy of dramatising, as he engaged humanity with the verities of existence. Rwandan Genocide is an earlier task but it also generated later projects like Nollywood violent pictures which seemed to entertain and trivialise the seriousness and realities

of the human condition. Humanity regales in such celebrations but when faced with similar situations in reality, life becomes as hideous as it is excruciating.



Figure 1, Pieter Hugo, Rwanda 2004: *Vestiges of Genocide, Bodies covered in lime to preserve the evidence of mass killings at Murambi Technical College. Murambi, II.*
Courtesy: www.michaelstevenson.com

In Figure 1, there is a skeleton of a little child and some others. They lie sideways, close to one another on a wooden fabrication with legs and hands bent. This photo speaks for itself and would be better appreciated as a visual depiction of the horrors of war.

Pablo Picasso's painting, *Guernica* is a visual reflection of the horrors of the Spanish civil war in which the German Luftwaffe launched an air raid on the Basque town of Guernica on April 26th 1937. *Guernica's* imagery has been a subject of most scholarly works because of its preoccupying theme with death. In *Guernica*, this theme of death is reinforced by a hidden skull which dominates the viewer's subliminal impressions. Such themes are what Hugo's Rwandan skeletal forms re-echo in its attempt to shock the viewer with similar symbols of death. The employment of skulls and skeletons as symbols of danger

and death have been a major concern of the visual culture over decades. It speaks of horror, destruction, terror, mortality, the wreckage and aftermath of war. Hugo's Rwandan photos play on human imagination and prompts a deeper reflection of what these massacred people must have passed through before taking their last breath. The realities of war is here presented as speculative of the last struggle between life and death; the dying and their moments of affliction, misery, pain, grief and an eventual death.

MALAWI TUBERCULOSIS AND GUARDIAN: MALAWI

According to Bertha Nhlema Simwaka et al, "the National TB Data show that TB notification in Malawi has rapidly spread from 5, 334 in 1985 to over 28,000 in 2006."⁵⁸ Simwaka et al's report also shows that more women than men are being diagnosed with TB in the 15-34 year age group and that this reflects higher HIV prevalence amongst younger women in Malawi. The above information gives us a glimpse into Hugo's assignment in Malawi and how his camera might have made an already vulnerable group more susceptible. Figure 4 below is very strong and when I interviewed Hugo on why the subject was consciously disrobed, he has this to say:

That picture was taken for the World Health Organization relating to the treatment of tuberculosis and how the current systems are not working and a need for the implementation of a type of guardian system which has been working very well in Malawi. So there is a context in which that picture was taken and the subjects in the picture were interviewed and their testimonies indicated that they have started getting improved tuberculosis medication.⁵⁹

This helps the viewer to understand the context upon which photographers work and which must not be divorced from the interpretation.



Figure 2. Pieter Hugo, *Tabalure Chitope aged 30 with her guardian, Eletina Nedi*, Bottom Hospital, Lilongwe, Malawi. 2003.

Courtesy: www.michaelstevenson.com

In Figure 2, there are two women sitting, one unclothed up to the waist and the other fully clothed. The unclothed woman sits in front and has her sagged breasts exposed as she gazes with very sizably open and ample eyeballs. She looks emaciated and weak with her clavicle bone and chest bones projecting. The other woman peeping from her back looks older and wears a head tie. Her face is bone-dry and her eyes are hollowed with her manubrium stretching her neck veins to reveal further the dehydrated nature of her skin.

Malawi photographs are also part of Hugo's earlier assignments that fall within the bounds of commission. In the picture above, reality is presented to us as being unmediated yet the 'real' here is also consciously invoked through the figure's obvious attention to the camera. The rigidity of the

sick woman's face-the camera pose indicates that there is an intention to conjure reality. Reality in such representations has been challenged by recent advocates who insist that the visual reality of HIV/AIDS needs not expose the apparent physicality of a dying victim.

HIV/AIDS DEATHS: SOUTH AFRICA



Figure 3. Pieter Hugo, *Monwabisi, Mtana*, 2005, lambda print edition of 5 + 1AP, 61 x 50cm, Courtesy: www.michaelstevenson.com

Figure 3 is a photo of a victim of HIV/AIDS named Late Monwabisi Mtana in his coffin. The photo shows only the head wrapped with a white blanket. The eyes are closed and the cheeks sunken. The skin is pigmented with yellowish spots and also sagged around the eyelids.

This is a photograph that is difficult to look at, yet impossible to look away from. The thematics of HIV/AIDS issues and the representational certainty of unveiling key details, no matter how the photographer tries to hide it, together appeal to the viewer's ambivalence. This viewership to a more personal problematic does not, however, do away with the complex of absorption and /versus emotionality. It confronts the viewer

with a feeling of shock and dangers inherent in reckless sexual lifestyles. One could however say that the picture is menacingly reprimanding as the message seems to sound a hush warning to the viewer.

The representation of HIV/AIDS has been very problematic and there is a growing body of critical re-examination of such representations. In many instances it has been advanced that those living with HIV/AIDS yet enjoy healthy lifestyles should be used in such representations to illustrate modern medical breakthrough in the alleviation of the scourge. But Hugo tends to ignore such views in his visual dramatisation of life's realities of which people would prefer to shy away from.

MUSINA/MESSINA: SOUTH AFRICA

In Musina/Messina series, by juxtaposing pictures of White poor families and Black middle class families Hugo seems to transform the emblem of nobility and wealth around White families in South Africa. He seems to say that poverty may not after all be a selective phenomenon but part of the society's dilemma. He again tries to show the pathos and the injury of race in a country where post-apartheid democratic dividends may not have been seriously felt by the majority of the population. Almost all the portraits in the Musina series wear an angry disposition perhaps to re-enforce their disenchantment with the system. The photographs seem to suggest that their agitations during the apartheid era have been frozen into an unacceptable poise. They seem to say, 'although we are free, we are not happy'.

A brief historical overview of Messina may help our appreciation of Hugo's photographs in the town. In 1904 a copper-mining town was discovered in Messina which is located south of the great Limpopo River, on the border between South Africa and Zimbabwe. The name Messina was a colonial coinage,

the original name, Musina being only recovered in 2002. Through Musina, thousands of Zimbabweans cross the border illegally into South Africa to escape the tyranny in Zimbabwe. In the process, many are caught and repatriated to Zimbabwe. Many also get caught up by the dangerous cataclysm and fiasco of life taking place at the border. This town shelters South Africa's biggest producer of diamonds and under such conditions of the flow of wealth, 'money and blood' intersects. Life at border towns is a hodgepodge of spectacles, entanglements and complications involving situations like robbery, prostitution, smuggling, arm proliferation, money laundering, HIV/AIDS pandemic, illegal migration to mention but a few. Just like many other border towns elsewhere, Hugo found life in Musina quite complex and decided to "engage with humanity in all its complexity".⁶⁰ He photographed mainly family portraits-black and white, "things on the streets, landscapes, mineshafts, aberrations, obvious contradictions"⁶¹ among others.



In Figure 4 Pieter Hugo, Messina/Musina:
Pieter and Maryna Vermeulen with Timana Phosiwa 2006.,
Courtesy: www.michaelstevenson.com

In Figure 4, there is a white couple and a little black boy. Their sitting arrangement could be described as mutual. The

man wears a short with his upper torso left bare exposing his hairy chest. One of the legs is prosthetic and he wears sandals on both legs. He clasps the wife from the shoulder with his right hand. In between his embrace and the wife is a little black boy whom the wife holds very close to her belly using her left arm in a way that squeezes her breast. The wife is barefoot and wears a blouse and long skirt. Her right arm also holds the little boy's right foot and she has a timorous gaze and an expression that suggests that her mouth may have been devoid of complete incisors dentition. Her face has obvious wrinkles on both cheeks and her general countenance gives her an older age than the husband.

The general pose of this picture is relatively mechanical and their togetherness seems to be systematised. The apparent contradiction of this photo arises from the little black boy and the way he has been cuddled into the white couple's world. This is a very contemplative picture that is highly equivocal and impugnable in the face of the 'black and white' debate not only in South Africa but globally. The reading of the photo could as well be misleading, suspicious and vague. But in the midst of the streaming interpretations, Hugo explains: "Pieter and Maryna have a very complex relationship with the child in her arms. They are renting accommodation from the father of the child. The father was shot in the spine during a heist, and has spent months in the hospital and rehabilitation in Johannesburg while they've taken care of his child"⁶².

The challenge of reality in this photo is an assumption, upon a quick glance, that the little boy could have been adopted by the white couple but the above interpretation reveals that they have been compelled by circumstances to carter for him. The above explanation, however suggests that reality could be transposed and that there is more to human relationships than meets the eye.

HYENA AND OTHER MEN: NIGERIA

In the series, *The Hyena and Other Men*, Hugo tacitly enacts the cosmopolitan simulations in human existence even as individuals try to survive the disorder and harshness of the modern city. The photos were shot in the two most populated cities in Nigeria, Lagos and Kano and the subjects make daily living by displaying and romanticising the wild amidst the crowd of onlookers that patronise them either through generous donations of money or by purchasing their herbs. According to Hugo, "I traveled 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."⁶³ 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.⁶⁴

The above statement encapsulates the drama of life for this group of people in Nigeria which Hugo has captured with his lens. It even becomes more chilling when one becomes privy to the story of one of these men about an encounter with the Nigerian police. According to Abdullahi Ahmadu, "We refused to stop at a police checkpoint, so the police opened fire on us, killing two hyenas and two fellow policemen. To protect themselves, they fixed a charge of armed robbery on us. Thank God that the case has died a natural death".⁶⁵ Below is one of the numerous pictures of this group taken by Hugo.



Figure 5. Pieter Hugo, *Hyena Men: Mummy Ahmadu and a snake charmer with a rock python*, Abuja, Nigeria, 2005.
Courtesy: www.michaelstevenson.com

In figure 5, the man holds a big python around his neck. The little girl within his embrace also holds the python close to her face with her right hand rubbing the python's mouth. She looks innocently at the camera almost oblivious of the python she is holding while the man looks seriously at the camera. The man wears three rings on his three left fingers. The little girl is well clothed and wears an ear ring. The man is clothed in blue jeans and a black singlet. His hair is stylishly well shaved. Behind them is a fading tree.

The disturbing nature of this photograph stems from the venomous nature of the python and the way the little girl fondles it. The photograph foregrounds the hazardous nature of subsistence at certain levels of humanity. It exposes the menace of child innocence or you may say child abuse. That 'Mummy Adamu' (the little girl) is absolutely oblivious of the prevailing dangers affords the man an opportunity to exploit her innocence for commercial purposes. But in apparent contradiction to the above feeling Abdullahi replies: "She cannot be harmed; it's the same thing with the snakes and monkeys.

She has taken a portion of traditional herbs and has been bathed in it. So her safety from the animals is guaranteed for the rest of her life".⁶⁶ This is one of the pictures Hugo took in Nigeria of the Hyena men who make money performing with dangerous animals on the streets of Lagos. Yet contrary to Abdullahi's claims, I was in Nigeria when during one of these performances in Kano State around 1999, one of the men was attacked by the snake and he died on the spot. It was a news that made newspaper headlines in Nigeria and I remember it very vividly.



Figure 6, Pieter Hugo, Hyena and other Men, *Dayaba Usman with the monkey, Clear*, Nigeria, 2005.

Courtesy: www.michaelstevenson.com

In Figure 6, there is a monkey and a young man both sitting on a wooden support. The young boy named Dayaba Usman has a facial scarification and he wears a T-shirt, a brown trouser, slippers and a necklace. He also wears a watch. The monkey named Clear, wears a football jersey and sits next to Usman as it places its hands on his (Usman's) laps. One of Clear's legs is placed on the wooden bench while the other leg too short to touch the ground, suspends from the chair

downwards. Usman holds a chain tied across Clear's waist. Clear's tail could be spotted as it shows from under the wooden chair. A short whip is seen lying between Usman's feet and the ground. The ground is dusty with a faint view of few rubbish around.

This picture is captured between the wild and the domestic. It oscillates between man and the beast and modalities of disciplining the wild. The stick on the ground is seen here as a means of communicating with the monkey and a strategy of subjugation over the wild. But seen from a refined perspective of controlling pets, this tactics is perceived as barbaric and it questions the treatment of animals in certain parts of the world where the notion of Man as the chief controller over other lesser animals holds strong grounds. Between the Hyena Men and their beasts lies a bestial language of brute force and mercilessness. According to Abdullahi: "We use heavy sticks to hit the 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"⁶⁷.

NOLLYWOOD: NIGERIA

The Nollywood video Film Industry in Nigeria has unarguably 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. In what Appadurai calls "global localities" and "grassroots globalization,"⁶⁸ Nollywood emerged in the 1970s as a mode of cultural production to show that in Kwame Anthony Appiah's words that "African productivity grows apace"⁶⁹ despite the politics of 'centre' which seems to place Africa forever at the 'periphery'. According to Onookome Okome, Nollywood responds to "eccentric currents of modernity" by engaging in "complex interplay of economic and cultural needs."⁷⁰

The predominating 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"⁷¹. 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. 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 fictitious world imposed upon the viewer's gaze as a representation of the everydayness. The internalisation of such narratives imposes on the viewers as a totality of the debacle inherent in the modern society.



Figure 7. Pieter Hugo, Nollywood Izunna *Onwe and Uju Mbamalu*.

Enugu, Nigeria, 2008

Courtesy of Michael Stephenson . www.michaelstephencon.org

In figure 7, the boy is carrying the girl who looks like his victim. The boy's mouth which is a bit ajar exposes a Dracula-like teeth projections steeped in blood. His eyes are also fearfully reddish and accentuating the mysteriousness around him. He is dressed in a green singlet and blue-green jeans with a necklace dangling from his neck. His hair makes a little encroachment unto his forehead with his face looking straight at the camera in a somewhat bizarre gaze. The girl is lying helplessly on top of 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. They are set against a milk-coloured coated wall.

This figure may have sought to capture the vampire world. An occult world in which, a segment of the human population is terrifyingly caught between doubt and conviction; reality and illusion.



Figure 8, Pieter Hugo, Nollywood Series, *Song Iyke with Ebube, Thank God and Mpompo*, Enugu, Nigeria, 2008. Small size: C-print, image size 60 x60 cm, paper size 64 x 64 cm, edition of 10 + 2AP

In Figure 8, there are four figures, one man burnt with all his flesh almost torn apart. His right hand which is clutching unto a rifle is raised up with the rifle pointing to the sky. His legs are somehow spread. There are three children one at the left hand side of the man and the other two at the right hand side. One of the two children at the right hand side wears a short and old sandals with the upper body left bare. He stands with arms akimbo gazing at the camera while the boy beside him is bare-footed and also wears a short and yellow shirt gazing at the camera. The other little boy on the left hand side wears a trouser and a shirt and gazes fixedly at the camera. They all stand beside a heap of burning rubbish on a dusty ground. Behind the burning rubbish is a small dry bush and a wooden electric pole. There are some little chickens feeding from the rubbish. Behind the bush and a little far removed from the scene is an old fenced building with some surrounding trees including palm trees.

Connotatively, this work is packed with meanings. The severity of the scar on the man's flesh indicates that were this man a normal human being he should have long been dead. But the photograph gravitates between reality and hyper-reality. The man's allure suggests someone just emerging victorious from a long heated battle. In what seemed like the hero of some action packed movie, perhaps as an equivalent of Arnold Schwarzenegger's *Terminator*, the man emerges as the immortal and invincible skeletal form of *Terminator* to put an end to a deadly combat. The children pose in a relaxed mood in the midst of the gory spectacle of the figure because they are apparently sure of its harmlessness.



Figure 9. Pieter Hugo, Nollywood Series, *Malachy Udegbonam with Children*, Enugu, Nigeria, 2008. C-print, image size 60 x 60 cm, paper size 64 x 64 cm, edition of 10 + 2AP

Figure 9 is set in front of an old wall with a glimpse of an iron-protected damaged glass window that is also as old as the wall. The man wears a cascading black hair and bushy beard and his head is crowned with a stem of thorns with his face also smeared with blood. His rib and raised palm indicate a pierced hole through which blood drips. There are also laceration on the greater part of his body and legs. He is tying a white wrapper. In his company are two young girls and two little boys. Except for the girl on the right hand side who is wearing a red old slippers others are barefooted. The youngest boy in front is bare chested while the boy next to him wears a blue short and yellow T-shirt. The other two girls have their hairs plaited and are well clothed.

This work is set against a polemical emergence of the Black Messiah in many quarters of Nigeria and indeed Africa. Over the past years, a growing number of questionable and self appointed plenipotentiary church overseers have emerged

in Nigeria arrogating God-like powers unto themselves and in fact claiming omnipotent authority as God himself. The Nigerian home video has also captured this mindset among the practitioners and the fanaticism it brewed across the entire population

Conclusion

This essay may have demonstrated that reality is constantly interrogated in Hugo's search for the spectacles of human existence. It shows that life itself is full of exaggeration.

Hugo has played on our imaginative assumptions and conclusions of the presented visual image by reminding us that an image could be an archive constituting of highly complex and systematic filters. More so Hugo advocates that there is but little simplicity in human life and that photographic images may reinforce the larger complications of life through a deliberate overstatement.

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