

Politics of the Strange

Revisiting Pieter Hugo's Nollywood

Nomusa Makhubu

all photos by Pieter Hugo

... THERE ARE MANY NIGERIANS WHO HAVE REFUSED TO BUY INTO THE CULTURE OF WATCHING NOLLYWOOD MOVIES BECAUSE OF THE STRONG PRESENCE OR MOTIF OF "RITUAL AND JUJU"...

(PHOTO EGHAGHA 2007:70)

In a photographic essay accomplished between 2007 and 2009, South African photographer Pieter Hugo depicts ambiguous images of "supernatural" characters in Nigeria's Nollywood.¹ The majority of these photographs were taken in Enugu. Hugo's *Nollywood* (2008/2009) has been exhibited widely in South Africa and in European, Australian, and American cities such as Rome, London, Paris, Amsterdam, Terragona, New York, Los Angeles, Sydney, and Adelaide as well as Auckland, New Zealand. Each portrait illustrates the grotesque in Nollywood. The cosmetic work for this photographic series is attributed to Gabazzini Zuo, a Nollywood actor and make-up artist.² The "monstrosas" in these portraits are framed so that they appear to have a sense of belonging to the space they occupy, illustrating a strange coexistence with those who surround them. This approach raises some pertinent questions regarding what the proliferation of juju or witchcraft images may mean for the representation of Nollywood in general. Central to some of the discussions surrounding these photographs is the prescribed impotence or powerlessness of the "monstrosas" and the ease with which Hugo's constructions are consonant in conventional social life. The "monsters" in this series do not pose a threat; rather they appear "at home" in Enugu, Nigeria. The key objective of this paper is to unpack the ways in which this intriguing imagery can be prejudicial. Photographs are powerful objects whose content, whether truthful or fictional, can influence how people and places are perceived.

Although Hugo's photographs have been celebrated, they have also been lambasted as a "misrepresentation" of Nollywood.³ Namely, this rejection also alludes to a common denunciation of Nollywood video film for "mis-representing 'us' as a 'nation.'" The magico-religious elements that constitute representations of the supernatural in Nollywood video-film are on one hand argued to be a kind of retrogressive neo-primitivism⁴ and, on the other hand, are seen as a means to decode social and cultural politics (Meyer 2002, Haynes 2007). The occult, according to Haynes (2007:144–45) "permeates all social environments in the world of the videos, and while one can find examples where it is associated with the primitive or village world, as opposed to urban modernity [...], more often it is integral to the representation of modernity and modern wealth." It is "a crucial function of the video films" (ibid., p. 144). The significance of the occult in Nollywood is widely acknowledged even though it has been solidly rejected as an adulteration of established local cultural production.

CONFRONTING PIETER HUGO'S NOLLYWOOD

One image in the photographic series portrays a couple: Chris Nkoko and Patience Unueh, Enugu, Nigeria (2008; Fig. 1). Patience, dressed in a striking green dress and extravagant head wrap, crosses her hands and stares intently at the photographer. She sits between her purse and the Baphomet-like Chris, whose body is darkened and his eyes reddened. We recognize that he is not innately a malevolent creature but is made to appear as such. In addition to the gender difference, she is human, he is bestial. Many attributes differentiate the two and render them strange to each other. A boundary fence separates the two characters from the community, circumscribing their space as if they are in transit or awaiting a journey. Patience's head wrap begins to appear as a reflection of Chris's horn; his calm and nonthreatening