BOOK REVIEW:

Engagement or Acquiescence?

On Critique in Practice: Renzo Martens’ Episode III: Enjoy Poverty

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A plantation labourer maintains the overgrowth with a machete in central DRC (Democratic Republic of Congo). Exasperatedly, he complains of the cyclical nature and the amount of work compared to the money earned: ‘It takes three days to make half a dollar’. He will appear again at the film’s end. Viewers never learn his name. Next, the camera is in an urban market where charity workers hand out parcels to locals whilst enthusiastically taking photographs; a notably

Film still from *Enjoy Poverty*, Renzo Martens, © Renzo Martens 2008
pale youth in a charity t-shirt beams as he does so. The camera is simultaneously a tool and imposition of distance. Finally, Martens is on a small fishing boat with three other men. When they land, he is disparaging about their small catch, suggesting they should fish for something else. Understandably perplexed, the fishermen are slow to respond: ‘This is what we do’. A figure in uniform asks who Martens is – ‘I’m a journalist’, he answers. His response is apparently satisfactory, or at least sufficient to deter further questions.

Over the course of ninety minutes, Martens goes on to demonstrate, participate in and bluntly outline the inequalities and relentless exploitation experienced in DRC. For example, he parodies moralising mottos – they must help themselves, we can’t give them what they don’t already have – whilst others carry his heavy camera equipment and boxes containing a florescent sign, which when erected reads ‘Enjoy Poverty, please’. Soon after, at an exhibition of plantation photography showing romanticised, black and white images of workers, he asks buyers whether they think the mise-en-scène subjects are rich or poor. A little later, he poses a question at a World Bank meeting, asking if poverty is worth $1.8 billion annually, whether it can be considered DRC’s primary resource and thus treated as such. Around one quarter of this money is, viewers learn, recycled back into the aid industry by being spent on ‘technical assistance’, a euphemism for consultancy. Roughly halfway through the film, it is indicated to Martens that between 70–90 percent flows back to some countries by allegedly selective investment in situations from which donors can directly benefit. For much of the film’s second half, Martens trains local photographers to make pictures of poverty, of ‘raped women, corpses and malnourished children’ (this last, viewers watch them photograph), an export hypothetically more valuable than coffee, palm oil and coltan combined. If international photojournalists are making
$50 per image, locals should quit photographing local weddings and parties, for which they make roughly $1 per month, and instead capitalise on DRC’s major resource by turning their lenses on money-making shots.

In testament to the film’s vexed reception, ongoing over a decade since the work was made, *Critique in Practice* draws together some thirty previously published and newly commissioned texts. As stated in Charles Esche’s foreword and in the introduction by editor Anthony Downey, however, the volume is far from exhaustive in terms of published texts, or resolved with regard to points of argumentation. The reluctance of certain figures to accept the invitation to write, critics who have otherwise taken a stance against the film at various public events, is apparently the result of opposition towards granting the film unnecessary further attention. All the more reason, I would argue, that this collection deserves to be read, given that the film’s contribution to debates concerning critical aesthetic practices and activism, documentary-making and human rights discourse will surely continue – and not least as it relates to Martens’ ‘gentrification’ programme in DRC centred on the founding of the art gallery and community project, the Institute for Human Activities (IHA), also discussed in the volume by several authors. Here, I will address various perspectives taken in the essays, and refer to some of the episodes throughout the film, later attempting to sketch some tentative points of opposition, given their absence. This latter part of the discussion will ask whether the lack of reference to scholarly literature or thought outside of the Western purview in a number of the texts risks overlooking the representational agency of various figures featured in the film.

*Critique in Practice* is divided into three sections. ‘Receptions and Interventions’ contains some additional considerations on their original texts by the authors. None have changed their mind, although Matthias De Groof describes the process of changing some of his views about the film after lengthy email exchanges with Martens. ‘Critical Frameworks’ offers some old and new theoretically driven readings, while ‘Beyond Enjoy Poverty’ contains exclusively new texts. It seems to me, nevertheless, that three predominant and sometimes interrelated claims are made throughout. Firstly, that the film is so conceptually aware of itself that it anticipates or pre-empts critique. Secondly, its target audience is the frivolous ‘we’ of the so-called artworld, and therefore exposes inherent contradictions similar to charges of spectacle frequently levelled at Western media outlets and NGOs. Thirdly, that taking issue with Martens’ use of the camera is, or should be, secondary to what it actually shows.

A key concern with Martens’ film, then, is the extent to which it rehearses or stages an intervention in a well-known narrative. For several writers the latter is achieved by negating more typical approaches to representing humanitarian crises. According to Els Roelandt, *Episode III* attempts to reconfigure the situation in DRC by portraying the material effects of economic asymmetries as globally accountable, rather than self-contained or independent of any external political structures. Similarly, in Frank Vande Veire’s view, the documentary stages an intervention in the more routine conviction that the so-called West needs ‘sensitising’ via the
business of exonerating charity images. Indeed, the filmmaker suspends his audiences’ expectation that his intentions are good, aimed at foregoing the easy identification with his actions more usually displaced by onscreen altruistic activities and/or the capacity to donate money. Empathy has an intrinsic market connection, and the image economy is both alarmingly self-fulfilling and disturbingly self-perpetuating. For T. J. Demos, the medium of documentary itself is critically foregrounded, intended to undo the more abundant presentation of optimistic globalist narratives:

The scandal that is the film puts us squarely before the fault lines of globalization’s many crises today, including the disastrous fallout of neoliberal structural adjustment policies implemented in Africa and the Global South since the 1980s, the failures of humanitarian practice and its compromised ethical discourse, and the paradoxes of both politically engaged photojournalism and contemporary political art. (p 132)

Drawing on Martens’ own response to the question of replicating exploitation, it is the justifications, excuses and obfuscations regularly offered that actually negate the suffering of neocolonised people.

The 1985 Live Aid event provides a further useful reference in the texts. This largescale, televised, popular music charity event was definitive of the proceeding attitude that ethically-minded viewers could ameliorate famine with small one-off monetary donations, without demonstrating the need for structural reorganisation of postcolonial global economies. In conversation with Nina Möntmann, Eyal Weizman outlines his understanding of the misdirections in Live Aid organiser Bob Geldof’s mantra, ‘morality is always above politics’, where the funds raised ended up being used in Ethiopia to lure inhabitants to rebel-held zones subject to ethnic cleansing. For Weizman, it is also important that the film is addressed within the context of contemporary artworlds, where it can be understood further as a ‘critique of easy leftism’ (p 250). Yet, Weizman points out, one issue with Martens’ work is also that it risks framing the opposite, leaving the egregious recommendation to ‘Enjoy Poverty’ as the only option available. Less approvingly, for Möntmann, Martens’ ambiguity, inconsistency and sometimes silly approach fails to offer proper scrutiny of the moralising issue apparently under interrogation and to detail the actual flawed application of humanitarian aid. Comparison is made by Möntmann – and by several other writers throughout the book – to Werner Herzog’s Fitzcarraldo, owing to the unlikeliness of his venture, as well as to Jonathan Swift’s eighteenth-century, derisive ‘Modest Proposal’ that the impoverished Irish sell their children for food. Dan Fox’s short contribution is the most adverse, suggesting that ‘Episode III’ exploits audiences’ desire for work that demonstrates “authentic” political engagement. By acknowledging his own complicity Martens does not legitimize it’ (p 59). Similarly, Nato Thompson takes issue with the film’s double bluff, ‘geared toward the artworld’, suggesting that the work ‘is not really meant for
a broad public. The fact that power takes advantage of the weak is certainly not news for those that experience it’ (p 127).

Preoccupation with Martens’ caricature of the lone or earnest anti-hero may, however, have its own consequences. Consider, again, the sequence in the film’s second half during which local photographers are trained to picture the types of poverty sought after by international media outlets. There is a discernible, staged or perhaps even necessary ambiguity around Martens’ own prescience. Viewers, one suspects, are shown something that they know to be a reality, assume will fail or else are surprised when it does, to varying extents. In contrast, the group of photographers Martens recruits suggest, at the very point his plan is outlined to them in front of a whiteboard, that they ‘have no access to the market’. Whilst appearing dubious about his reassurances that he can facilitate access to this market, they go along with it anyway. When it fails, the group nevertheless appear disheartened as they wander off, dejected. However, a majority of texts in the volume do not really address the situation of these photographers or the dispossessed more generally, viewing Martens’ presumed callousness as either required in communicating injustices via critical rearticulation of documentary practices to assumed audiences, or affirmative of routine disempowerment doubly exploited for this filmmaker’s camera.

It might be noted here, as disclosed in Artur Żmijewski’s interview with Martens, that the filmmaker did manage to sell some pictures on behalf of the photographers, but he does not speak about it or mention it in the film because it ‘isn’t part of the status quo’ that he wants to show. Martens, then, wishes activity in the film to be addressed on its terms: ‘Art needs to take full responsibility for its presence. More than any other medium, art can deal with itself, rather
than with what’s outside’ (p 117). That such an instantiation might encourage one to address the film homogenously or singularly as ‘art’ is – and I don’t believe Martens intends this – less convincing, however.

Indeed, an identifiable hindrance in many of the texts in the book is a provinciality of references that struggle to move beyond otherwise habitual references to the icons of modern art’s Western history. For Paul O’Kane, Martens becomes Gustave Courbet, Edouard Manet and Joseph Beuys, as well as offering comparisons to Greenberg’s defence of art’s autonomy related to Abstract Expressionism. According to Ruben de Roo, the documentary’s self-referentiality alerts ‘us’ to ‘our own responsibility and failings with respect to global poverty’ (p 106). De Roo also makes a slightly dated reference to Walter Benjamin’s call for the solidarity of cultural producers with the proletariat. Such references are, in my view, a little unhelpful, if not quite restrictive, given that the aim of this and several of the contributions is to convince readers of the film’s critical and political exceptionality. Indeed, the extent to which the projection of a unified wage-earning class can conceivably traverse (neo)colonial lines, if they ever could, remains doubtful and requires radical retooling.

Pieter Van Bogaert’s discussion of the film is probably at risk of the greatest banalisation of materials, pursued in comparative dialogue with Georges Didi-Huberman’s defence of showing four photographs taken by Sonderkommando during the Second World War death camp at Auschwitz. This is not to suggest that Didi-Huberman’s debate with Claude Lanzmann is not a crucial reference point for discussion concerning the photographic recording of violence and murder – it certainly is – but that the specificity of both contexts is evaded as a result.¹ Perhaps the most obvious oversight here is that the Auschwitz images are related to a context of limited contemporary visual evidence, whereas Martens’ aim is to contextualise and confront a scenario where one of the problems is the abundance of photographs – that is, without even mentioning the capacity for more useful comparison to ethnographic colonial photography. The latter might have aided the examination of sequences in Episode III that potentially mimic the essentialising terms in which exploitative European migrants have long framed oppression and impoverishment, in locations that their presence has otherwise done little to relieve.

De Groof touches on this in reflecting on the work’s methodological failings, writing that ‘[p]ostcolonialism provides new perspectives, while the film shows the old relationships. The film stages the geopolitical hierarchies that postcolonialism deconstructs, and exposed the ethnocentrism that postcolonialism aims to combat.’ De Groof argues that ‘while postcolonialism produces reorientation, the film reintroduces the north, convinced that self-reflexivity is the precondition for the postcolonial enterprise in the West’ (p 144). In Eva Barois De Caevel’s view, however, the strength of the work lies in its capacity to brutally rearticulate the ‘epistemic violence’ at the root of the West’s imperial manufacturing of the continent of Africa: ‘both

asserting and reasserting that the only possible relationship between the Western World (or Western people) and the African continent (or African people) was one in which the African continent was built, controlled, organized, mediated, subsumed, and consumed by the Western World for its own benefit (p 200). It is here, then, where more nuanced approaches to relationships between the context on the ground and its visual framing are grappled with.

That audiences are intended or assumed to be external to events in the film is, of course, outlined in multiple further sequences. For instance, Martens explains to several people that the term ‘Enjoy Poverty’ on his fluorescent sign is not, in fact, spelt wrongly. It is not in Lingala or French, he says, so that it will be legible to viewers across Europe, explaining that the film will not be shown in DRC. Indeed, at the end of the book, a list of exhibitions and screenings of Episode III are overwhelmingly in the US and Europe, perhaps explaining some of the responses to the film. For J A Koster, Martens’ film embraces its own ‘inconsequentiality’ (p 270) by replaying the inbuilt failures and insufficiencies of humanitarian aid. Accordingly, there is an explanation for the apparent absence or ‘poverty’ of convincing criticisms: ‘The critic is unable to find fault with the film since the evidence seems overwhelmingly to support Martens’ positions’ (p 282). This strategy of over-identification is read by Koster as Martens’ adopting of several personas, including the aid worker, the ‘artist-prophet’ and religious missionary, culminating as a Brechtian learning play and compared to the playwright’s compelling of the destitute in The Threepenny Opera (1928) to enjoy and profit from their poverty. It is also pointed out that the leader of the gang in Brecht’s play similarly used poverty as an aesthetic resource. Yet despite its many useful insights, one can’t help thinking that Brecht staged fictional plays with actors that he compelled to adopt superficial characteristics on stage. Removal of what the
playwright called the fourth-wall dimension insisted on the necessity of examining narratives and their reconstruction as a political act. Marten’s characters are, of course, not actors. If Brecht informs Martens’ apparent adopting of several personas with the film’s intended audience in mind, then the extent to which that justifiably explains the role of the impoverished people featured, whether inconsequentially or not, is a little more problematic.

Nevertheless, I broadly agree that the work encourages greater critical distance regarding pervasive documentary languages, as well as other amorphous aestheticist alleviations prevalent in the so-called artworld. In Downey’s own theoretically driven chapter – written in polemical dialogue with Thompson’s text reproduced in the book and a separate text by Möntmann, not reproduced – moral indignation emerges as the ‘art world vying for relevance’ (p 227) in other contradictory ways. Downey takes issue with a set of ethical standards that he sees as permeating a ‘faux-consensus’ (p 231), or institutionalised willingness to incorporate vogue political concepts rather than deal meaningfully with them. That artworks must conform to a ‘rhetoric of enterprise, equality, self-reliance, diversity, inclusion, and participation’ (p 229) is viewed as a kind of hangover of relational aesthetics, which simultaneously wishes to turn its back on or ignore poverty by unwittingly reproducing the feel-good factor of neoliberal hubris.2 Downey is right, in my view, to eschew a position that is plainly for or against, otherwise leading to a binary by which the work is judged according to predetermined criteria for success.

The film is, of course, not flawless. And nor is there a straightforward reason to treat the work monolithically, as simply good or bad. The point is surely to address representative politics and their relationship to events, structures and conditions of existence as they are constituted on the ground. Some sequences show Euro-American photographers in scenarios that are bound to disturb viewers, regardless of prior insight. Whilst photographing corpses under the guidance of military personnel, one photojournalist casually receives a mobile phone call, conceivably demonstrating the unremarkable nature of his work. Others prompt maladroit discomfort within the film. Martens later probes the same photo-journalist about the ownership of images, suggesting that their making requires labour on both sides of the lens. Defensiveness at the implied accusation of profit from privation prompts Martens to back down. Yet, as in the case of the local photographers Martens recruits, a majority of detail that is not only about the image economy but about conditions suffered under the intractable logic of the neocolonial plantation comes from those directly experiencing it. For instance, a worker involved in AngloGold Ashanti’s mining operation is well aware of the invidiousness that he finds himself in, comparing UN protections of mineral extractions as well profiting Europeans, Americans and Chinese: ‘each of them comes to drain water and heads home’. The plantation labourer from the opening sequence also details to the camera the precariousness of his working situation. His contract is

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repeatedly terminated just prior to the legal obligation to provide him with a permanent one. No one is really as silent or incognisant as still photographs might portray.

Ariella Aïsha Azoulay writes that the film is not scandalous: ‘The scandal is the plantation’ (p 287). Martens’ film, she says, ‘unabashedly states its structural complicity and manifests it’ (p 291). Salient with Azoulay’s broader project, readers are encouraged to consider the work according to the weight of modern imperial historicism that took root in 1492.³ The privilege of critique is something now inherent to a bourgeois-cum-liberal democratic system. Photographers and artists are frequently utilised to maintain resultant divisions and contribute to its reproduction:

At the same time they are called to act morally, to beware of crossing the divide so as not to risk becoming colonial agents, and to preserve their innocence. This is one of the critical arguments that forfeits the emergence of a common interest in dismantling democratic liberal regimes premised on geographical and racial dividing lines, which are responsible for the extraction economy. In presenting the risk of becoming colonial agents as a future threat, this argument, first, erases the fact that artists active in Western art institutions are already colonial agents, and, second, creates the false impression that becoming colonial actors is a matter of free choice depending on content and intention and not a result of an inherited positionality, from which one should work hard to extricate oneself. (p 291)

That is, breaking the rules inherited by art’s system of plundering that otherwise informs the realities of the Western modern tradition, through museum or institutional claims towards universal representation and investment in material culture. The film is not about reproducing a humanitarian gaze but revealing its deficiencies: ‘Had the training of the photographers succeeded, Martens would have been the colonial actors who trained a small elite of photographers to fuel the abusive Western photographic enterprise’ (p 292). Photographs as replicas of a fixed, discursive form.

Lines of racialisation mentioned by Azoulay are largely absent from discussions in the collected texts. For Esche, the film does not exacerbate racialised divisions, owing partly to its framing of Martens as flawed ‘white man with good intentions’ that is the necessary product of engagement. Yet issue may be taken with the casting of certain figures onscreen as the alienated Fanonian double, and at times little much else. What might be brought into debate, then, relates further to the way Achille Mbembe has addressed elsewhere the legacies of the plantation complex as economic, disciplinary and penal apparatus entangled in the colonial invention or artifice of ‘blackness’ and its continued aesthetic reification.⁴ Consider also Gayatri Spivak’s well-known critique of first world intellectuals assigning agency to the oppressed, speaking for

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³ See Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism, Verso, London and New York, 2019

them as it were, in a way that replays colonial dominance. Thus, a critical account must be taken with regard to what and how something or someone is seen, how they are made to speak or assigned roles, linking activity on the ground to its visual framing.

The picturing of poverty and malnourishment that takes place during the film is difficult to watch, but as the writers in *Critique in Practice* suggest, in both a positive and negative light, it is not the first or the last time that it will be aestheticised. Instead, consider the film’s final sequences, which return to the plantation labourer seen at the beginning. After receiving email notification of the recommendation that his press pass be withdrawn, Martens visits the man from the film’s opening and his young family and offers them a meal he has prepared. Earlier in the film we have seen one of his children eat a mouse. The wretchedness of the family’s situation is brutally disclosed, including one of the physically and psychologically traumatised daughters who does not sleep and is in grave health. Once the children have eaten, Martens tells the father to finish the meal, which he is very pleased to do. It is at this point that Martens chooses to thank him for his ‘almost for free’ labour, as if he, Martens, is a diplomat. Martens then tells him that his situation will never change and that his perpetual misery is likely to continue. ‘In Europe we don’t want’ cocoa, coffee, palm oil or coltan ‘to be more expensive.’ What is especially cutting about this sequence, as in other parts of the film, is the plantation worker’s eventual acquiescence. The man’s startled response, beginning with an objection that ‘a man needs a salary’, merges into a kind of automatic subordination. Martens asks whether he has a ‘television, electricity, running water, a bicycle’, at which point the father has no choice but to admit he has ‘nothing’. He pleads, ‘you’ve seen my house’.

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6 Mbembe, op cit, pp 31–32
The logic of objectification and visual indignity is hardly departed with here, staged as it is in order to communicate a point to viewers. Martens’ perceivable callousness is also demonstrated elsewhere. For example, in the earlier sequence, mentioned above, when explaining the meaning of his fluorescent sign ‘Enjoy Poverty’. Distress is displaced with the humble refrain from a pair of inquisitors muttering ‘thank you’. In the focus by writers on an assumed audience, less attention is paid to the response of the plantation workers and impoverished people in the film. Yet as Felwine Sarr has discussed, also elsewhere, the fourth pillar of economic, political and cultural structures of subjugation to have spanned the colonial and neocolonial realities of the African continent, transpires as ‘an interiorized inferiority complex for some, for others, an abysmal lack of self-confidence’. Furthermore, ‘[t]here is still a tendency to deem whatever may come from the West as being better – and this is the case regardless of the domain – in terms of expertise, quality, and judgement. There seems to be a pathological decentring, a lack or absence of selfhood that translates into an inability to think for oneself, to judge and evaluate things on one’s own.’ A related question, then, is whether certain sequences in Martens’ film break with predominant visual cycles of subjection and dehumanisation in the framing of associated Africanness, an epistemic violence orientated and codified on racialised lines. Colonialist overtones might be argued to emerge internally in the film, both deliberately and involuntarily, regarding Martens’ apparent transition of character types and the coerced response of dispossessed people, respectively.

Writing from DRC, René Ngongo expects that viewers in the global North may be upset because the film shows how dreadful things are in the South. Drawing on the distribution of DRC’s resources globally, particularly the metallic ore coltan that is used ubiquitously in mobile communication devices, the ‘post-plantation’ is a reality that does not end in a single location but is a disjunct geopolitical, post-national reality. Angela Dimitrakaki picks up on the absence of alternatives presented by the film: ‘The artist does not meet with women’s cooperatives (presuming these exist) originating in the need to address in a different way the crisis of social reproduction evidenced throughout the film. In this respect, Enjoy Poverty appears to confront the hegemonic view of modernity relying on a homosocial web of relations among equal men, covering the spectrum from full power to relative power to disempowerment’ (p 325). The film, then, does fulfil its own prophecy. Neocolonial shackles are shown to be the logical conclusion of an imperialist pseudo-scientific humanism that once sought to ‘civilise’ the Global South, now shown to be a cynical political economy of humanitarianism that similarly benefits from the superficial aesthetic of benevolence. A further point of objection, therefore, might be made in asking whether the film earnestly accepts a singular notion of modernity, thus risking the presentation of neocolonial economic liberalism as the only political apparatus imaginable without attending to the possibility of others.

7 Felwine Sarr, Afrotopia, Drew S Burk and Sarah Jones-Boardman, trans, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2019, p 62
8 Ibid
Indeed, polarisation is reiterated at the film’s end once Martens leaves the plantation worker’s home and washes himself in the Lopori river. A little absurdly, Keith Snow, a human rights investigator and journalist apparently unknown to Martens, swims up and emerges from the river. Expressing his surprise, Martens did not expect to see another ‘white man’ in the area. Snow inquires whether he is there to ‘pillage, rape, and steal like the other white people’, to which the response is ‘no… I’m here to teach them how to deal with life’. The neocolonial connotations of his remarks are probably premeditated, like so much in this film, trusting his audience to recognise the ploy. Impromptu self-reflexivity may aid the film’s framing of scenarios like this one. Yet other components remain problematic, insofar as earlier sequences are highly staged, frequently at the expense of multiple anonymous characters featured.

*Critique in Practice* is not exhaustive in terms of published texts or points of argumentation. There are clearly things left to be addressed. For Sarr, writing perspicaciously in the context of the broader discourse that the film otherwise enters itself into, the question does not need to be dealt with from a singular or dominant perspective, but through articulating collective or organised alternatives to entrenched structures otherwise shown to be corrupt: ‘We can still bear witness to a troubled relationship with others, mainly with the former colonist, who struggles to place himself within a relationship of horizontality and reciprocity’. Many of the writers do look to IHA as raising a series of other issues; surely not a standalone endeavour, and which Martens’ newly released film *White Cube* (2020) focuses on. Perhaps, then, the debate that will surely continue as a result of this volume’s publication will proceed by refusing hermetic terms of address.