

**African poverty, taboo or standardised?**  
**On *Episode III – Enjoy Poverty (2008)***  
**by Renzo Martens**

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How is it possible that after a half-century of colonisation and fifty years of independence a nation still hasn't got a hold on the helm? How do we explain the enrichment of political leaders by trampling on their penniless citizens? And why is it that corruption always predominates over every form of legitimate government?

All these questions are implicitly brought to the fore by the documentary *Episode III – Enjoy Poverty (2008)* by the Dutch-Belgian artist Renzo Martens. It is a film about the Democratic Republic of Congo, a country with large reserves of raw materials. Though, notwithstanding the entire profit yield of gold, copper or cobalt, poverty is omnipresent as the country annually receives 1.8 billion dollars of foreign aid. Clearly, it's the multinationals that run off with these raw materials. The Congolese themselves work on the plantations for 0.20 dollars each day or, to escape from the political turmoil, they meekly flee to one of the refugee camps and seek refuge under a Unicef canvas.

According to Renzo Martens, the producer of *Enjoy Poverty*, there's no evading this reality. For the Congolese nothing has changed during the last decades. Out of sheer necessity they search for means of existence where these cannot be found, for example acting as a marriage photographer which yields approximately one dollar a month. The omnipresent international press photographers on the other hand who provide the West with the wretched images of rape, emaciated infants and slaughter, earn fifty dollars per picture. Now take for example the medical humanitarian organisation, Doctors Without Borders (Médecins Sans Frontières): obviously their fellow workers deliver great work and each saved child is a welcome bonus. However most of the development agency aid workers realise that they are not able to or cannot bring forth structural change.

Western journalists come to film the good deeds and show how these aid workers save the lives of undernourished children, only they never reveal the ongoing reasons for the undernourishment. This is because the fathers of these children keep on working on the plantations for next to nothing. It is the plantations that export their products to the West as cheaply as possible, without paying local taxes. If an NGO such as 'Doctors Without Borders' raised the question of the underlying economic pattern, then outright they would change the complete structure of donation that is connected to the import of dirt-cheap raw materials.

It is because the Congolese cannot earn anything from their raw materials that they are so poor, and it is because they are penniless that the Western NGOs who want to help Africa exist. *Enjoy Poverty* confronts us with this vicious circle in which the West plays the leading part. Martens holds a mirror up to our face through which we

are inevitably held responsible for the daily suffering, hunger and death of so many people in spite of all the existing feelings of solidarity with the Congolese.

*The clear conscience.*

For every engaged Westerner the above-mentioned accusation is as if one is being hit in the face. The provocation is even more intrusive as in the film Martens himself, with whom we willingly or unwillingly identify, plays the role of the superior and arrogant Westerner in his relation to the African people. Martens deprives us of our clear conscience and the conviction that, thanks to our regular financial contributions, the situation in Africa will soon improve. In every day life that clear conscience of ours is being supported by the overall myth that the Congolese are poor because of the continuous civil war in Congo, because their people rape each other, are corrupt and do not have the courage to install an adequate infrastructure.

We love to believe that the Congolese politicians are unreliable and not able to govern their country and meanwhile we ignore the fact that the so-called corruption of these people continually provides us with such cheap African products. The Congolese do not owe anything. This is truly dreadful for them, though not for us as to the West the humanitarian suffering of the Congolese is an essential means of income. For years on end a huge variety of NGOs have developed their humanitarian activities in the Congo, much to the pleasure of so many benefactors. In turn the media thoroughly employs the hunger and violence in Africa to provide the West with a well-balanced share of misery.

*Exploitation of poverty*

The Congolese do not owe anything; they are the mere owners of their own poverty. That is how it always has been and nothing points to the slightest chance of change. This is what these people need to realise. As such they would be better off reconciling with that reality and disposing of their poverty in a Western market economic manner. Let them enjoy poverty, and exploit their poverty on the Western market.

This, 'Enjoy Poverty', is the exuberant conclusion of Renzo Martens in his film. Martens' documentary is so provocative that it displays the complete opposite of what all other media and documentaries on Africa show, namely they hide our harrowing responsibility behind the empathic image of compassion. What's more, the media who report on poverty is in itself a market-driven product that is by no means beneficial for the poor. The economic-political set-up of exploitation is being spirited away by a momentous call for compassion and generosity. It is this split, this indispensable distance, between the poor South and the wealthy North that has brought about the maintenance of a continuous status quo in Africa. Martens reluctantly tries to break this distance apart. As the producer of his own film he identifies with Western fortune and supremacy. Proceeding from this authenticity Martens turns to the Congolese with a clear message: the situation will never improve, become reconciled with your poverty and consider it as the sole source of 'enjoyment'. Aligned with that message, the film shows us a shabby village community celebrating its solution in the clear blue neon night-light: *Enjoy Poverty!*

*Pandora's Box.*

The above-mentioned image turns us into staggered spectators. The filmmaker is no longer a mediator who brings about contact with the far-off outside world. On the contrary from the very beginning of the film it becomes apparent to all spectators that Renzo Martens, as the ever present Western opportunist, is actually our own prototype. Watching the film *Episode III – Enjoy Poverty* means watching ourselves. This confrontation is much more unbearable than the grinding images of starvation and death, because we can no longer escape this condition with empathy and generosity.

*Enjoy Poverty* turns our self-evident image of the world inside out. With his film Martens has opened Pandora's box. The conventional way of looking at the world, and its misery in particular, preserves the possibility of maintaining the outsider's position. Yet in this film we become an accessory to the dandy figure of Martens and it is precisely this matter that radically throws open the social reality. After watching *Enjoy Poverty* it becomes impossible ever to look again at images of poverty and misery in Africa without thinking of the film and the endless responsibility we carry with us for what is happening there.

*Two camps.*

Not all spectators instantly regain these conscious feelings of responsibility and there is always two camps. Why is that? What exactly occurs when we watch *Episode III - Enjoy Poverty*? According to one side everyone ought to see these images, while the others consider the film as completely improper. According to the latter such films are not worth the trouble of watching, moreover they should not even be made in the first place.

Where does this razor-sharp opposition come from? Obviously we come down on Renzo Martens because our illusionary position of altruism is being challenged. Martens shocks the right-minded Westerners in a very eye-opening way. Aid from the West is without purpose. On the contrary it maintains the status quo of famine, violence and death. Can this be told to the people? Is it permitted for an author or filmmaker to present oneself as the prototype of all culprits? Is he, as the ultimate agent provocateur, merely a *pars pro toto*, the equal amongst criminals? Or if anything does he, from his exalted insight, think himself above all guilty parties and consequently closer to the victims? And does the same go for all those who are convinced that this piece of art should be made and shown to the public?

Involuntarily it reminds us of the Islamic resistance to the Danish cartoons of the prophet Mohammed a few years ago. Although freedom of speech was then considered utterly important, the publicist was believed to have behaved in a socially irresponsible way, as he did not take into account the predictable reactions of so many Muslims who took offence at his irony. Their resistance arose from a sense of self-worth. They felt that their honour, which was supposed to be held into account, was impugned. So far as Renzo Martens acts for all Westerners, he equally throws up their integrity and virtue to be scrambled for.

Let us assume the following: the entire film represents the cry of distress of someone who is being tortured by everything he observes and as such the documentary offers

the filmmaker his personal excuse. Notwithstanding the rock hard reality in which the artist participates, there exists the medium of art that in the real world, distances itself from that rock hard reality. Renzo Martens turns his film into a piece of art. As such his creation becomes a separate entity that is not accountable to Third World policies, nor to the Western media, the NGOs, the free market economy or the exploitation mechanisms.

This freedom allows the artist to make a film *in harshness*, to do something that has no place in real functional life. Though notwithstanding the split, a piece of art always reveals something about reality, in this case the famine and misery in the Congo for which the West is to be held responsible. The piece of art offers the spectator a necessary distance which enables them to reflect upon the harsh reality. Because *Enjoy Poverty* is a piece of art, that means a separate entity, it offers the possibility to state so much more than ever would be possible in daily life.

Opponents of the film deny its fully artistic character in favour of the informative message that represents a complete reality (as one can find in the daily news items in the media). In the first instance it is important to emphasize that fortunately every piece of art can be made by virtue of freedom of speech. This basic right guarantees the permissibility of all kinds of opinions, including the freedom to decide on the ways of formulating the message. Where the arts are at stake, censorship cannot take place. Consequently there exists also the freedom to provoke, even to be mistaken. For the arts this means that not only the work of art in itself, but also its effect is being protected. This is what the Mohammed cartoons were about.

This privileged position of the artist nevertheless does not guarantee success. In the case of *Enjoy Poverty* many spectators refuse to see the film as it evokes a great deal of opposition amongst the many people who are sympathetic towards Africa's difficulties. When we deal with the fact that the story of the film is of no concern to the capitalistic free market economy because the Western consumer by definition puts his own interests first, then the question is raised: does Renzo Martens' message boomerang against himself, rather than enfeeble the taboo. Does it not merely confirm the stereotype image of the lazy African with his corrupt political leaders? In that case *Enjoy Poverty* again generates a breeding ground for the continuing caricature and grotesque exploitation.

#### *Hereditary guilt under taboo*

With his film Renzo Martens breaks a taboo, namely that we are all accessory to the famine, violence and corruption in Africa because we are part of the prosperous Western world. We are guilty because on a daily basis we profit from the consumer goods whose raw materials were well nigh stolen. Dedicating oneself to various humanitarian actions in order to improve the living conditions in the Congo and elsewhere does not change that. Martens trips up the false kind-heartedness: our solidarity and humanity are no longer significant.

Braking taboos is not a bad thing, because taboos cause intense fear of what lies hidden under the taboo and as such evokes opposition. In the case of Africa so many people are convinced that in first instance the Africans themselves are to blame for their poverty. Moreover the underlying impact of the poverty taboo outreaches the

mere fact that here and now we are stealing from Africa. It equally relates to our inherent responsibility towards Africa's overall structural problems that were generated by a long period of colonisation as well as by the continuous industrial neo-colonisation. We are aware of our hereditary guilt, though each day we add to it. This covering up of the guilt under the pretext of humanitarian aid is precisely what we are blind to.

That is why *Enjoy Poverty* is not about Africa. It is about the West, or better, about the mutual relations between the West and Africa and about the denigratory exploitation. In his film Renzo Martens is the embodiment of this position. It confronts us with the Western hereditary guilt, with our uneasy conscience with the nearly intangible situation, namely that we are all guilty. Out of self-preservation we tend to eliminate the discussion on the significance of such a documentary film. We put all hands on deck to deny our true guilt.