

## So Spoke the Semicolon

Episode III: Enjoy Poverty

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Renzo Martens, writer, director, camera

Episode III: Enjoy Poverty

Produced by Renzo Martens for Renzo Martens, Menselijke Activiteiten and Peter Krüger for Inti Films, 2009, video, 90 min.

“There are two kinds of pity,” the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig wrote, “one, the weak and sentimental kind, which is really no more than the heart’s impatience to be rid as quickly as possible of the painful emotion aroused by the sight of another’s unhappiness ... and the other, the only kind that counts, the unsentimental but creative kind, which knows what it is about and is determined to hold out, in patience and forbearance, to the very limit of its strength and even beyond.”<sup>1</sup> This distinction between the self-serving, volatile pity and the compassionate, altruistic kind opens up a complex set of questions in regard to the production and distribution of images of suffering. Such images do not address an already existing audience, but they create their own public. In order to do so, they often communicate through emotional channels, invoking denunciation, empathy, and pathos in an attempt to trigger public action. Pity can therefore be a persuasive, creative tool, rather than an ethical idea. Artist Renzo Martens, however, suggests disregarding the never-ending discussion of the rhetorical strength of images of human distress. His work instead scrutinizes the exploiters of suffering.

In Episode III: Enjoy Poverty, Martens visits the Democratic Republic of Congo with a camcorder, a press card, and a neon sign that reads “Please Enjoy Poverty.” The artist initially uses traditional documentary tropes as he presents generic yet very graphic representations of starvation, poverty, and death. His camera disturbingly zooms in on mortally malnourished children, the daily life of plantation workers, as well as stiff, rotting corpses of Congolese “rebels.” The nonchalant use of these images seems to question the spatial system in which pity is exercised. Contemporary foreign aid protocols and representations of distress create a spatial system in which there is an attempt to bridge the gap between the spectator and the distant sufferer. The larger this distance is, the more uncertain the moral responsibilities become. Visual mediation of suffering then exposes the spectator’s willing or unwilling detachment from the plight of the sufferer and attempts to establish some accountability. The spectator is expected to respond by indignation, outspoken protest, or charitable donation in order to prevent or stop the suffering that is documented in images. However, as the film unfolds, the interest of the artist shifts to the conditions under which images of human pain are produced, not the presumed power of images to create visceral effects—affect, outrage, or action.

Martens’s immediate targets are humanitarian aid organizations and news agencies. His questions are straightforward, if not predictable: Who benefits from photographing human pain and suffering?

To what extent are aid organizations dependent on the media coverage of disasters? And why is the local population deprived of the benefits of image-making, especially if poverty brings more money—through development aid—than their natural resources? To respond, the artist uses short vignettes that are reminiscent of investigative journalism. He digs for the truth that Western mainstream media often choose to ignore.

Martens meets with aid agencies, plantation workers, photojournalists, guerilla fighters, as well as workers of foreign corporations that exploit the natural resources in the Congo. The sequence of these informative scenes, however, evokes a feeling of haphazardness; it entails a series of loosely connected stories rather than rigorously developed evidence. Martens does not suggest an oversimplified and—dare I say—outdated critique of the complicity of aid organizations in sustaining—or rather perpetuating—suffering while aiming to alleviate it. The film is neither looking for an easy argument that blames the skewed ethics of Western photographers for making a living on others' suffering; nor does it propose radical or dramatized rescue methods for this paradox. Instead, Martens underlines that misery and poverty are lasting, and what should be discussed is the fact that the war against poverty has turned into an industry controlled by the so-called economically developed countries. Given this context, he prioritizes a provocative narrative over a well-structured, argumentative plot. He seems to stop his inquiry into the documentary or evidentiary roles of his images as he enters the realm of mimicry and performance.

Refusing the possibility of any external position, Episode III: Enjoy Poverty replicates the very system it aims to problematize. In an outrageous attempt to lecture a group of Congolese photographers about the image industry, the character of Renzo Martens raises the main question that lies at the heart of his journey to the Congo: who owns poverty? If a Western photographer can earn \$50 for each photograph of suffering, he asks why the locals keep photographing weddings and birthday parties and failing to escape their misery. As the now tutored Congolese photographers look for the most atrocious and gruesome photographs to guarantee maximum income, raped women, malnourished children, and dying men become the predominant objects of their images.

The enthusiasm of the local photographers does not last very long. After they request admission to the Médecins Sans Frontières hospitals, the MSF representative says that he will not allow them to exploit his patients. The consequence is that they are not entitled to make news and make a living off their own poverty. Challenged by the idea that the accredited Western journalists are also professional photographers, the representative shifts his argument by asserting that the deficient aesthetic and journalistic quality of local work does not meet the standard for news photographs. "Making an image is more than pushing a button," he adds. The project falls through, and Martens's failure to ensure the locals a share in the market resonates with the futility with which Western individuals or institutions arrive in unfamiliar settings and assert themselves as potential saviors.

In the end, Martens leaves the country after performing the only humanitarian ritual he can afford to actualize: offering a free meal to the family of one of the plantation workers, after which he attaches a European Union logo to a child's shirt. His heroic and patronizing approach does not allude only to colonialism, but also to the contemporary practices of news photographers and the logic of aid agencies, which are identified by a self-congratulating attitude despite their inability to provide the long-term structural changes that will prevent human suffering. What is crucial is that the plot does not document or critique what is outside the camera, but mimics the structures it observes, including its own. The project hence defies the traditional epistemology of objective criticism. Martens acknowledges that cameras, whether they belong to journalists, aid organizations, or artists like himself, are constitutive of the reality they represent: they always insert a power hierarchy; they intervene and act upon what happens as they gather and shape the public opinion. The distance between Martens's critique and the object he criticizes eventually collapses. The failure of the artist to bring the local photographers into the image industry therefore becomes the failure of the

existing systems of relief work and news coverage. The end does not seem to be a catharsis, but it amounts to proof of the artist's own complicity in the exploitation of images.

Enjoy Poverty remains introspective more than anything else. Caricature of the modes of representing distress also refers to the image-making economy of the visual arts, in which the artist himself is inscribed. At this point, one can easily accuse Martens of exploiting images of suffering for his artwork. It is indeed necessary to question the circulation of Enjoy Poverty—the added value and the audience that the work gains through being presented on the polished platforms of contemporary art and film festivals. Despite this imperative critique, what makes the work compelling is the way the artist reconstructs and dramatizes the structures it criticizes and to which it belongs. The film goes beyond a seemingly objective critique of the ethics of depicting suffering as it acknowledges its own subjectivity, weaknesses, and, more importantly, complicity as a politically engaged piece. Although it is made in a documentary fashion, various levels of manipulation show that the film is a powerful tool to explore and subvert the production and the consumption of images.

It is inevitable that the viewer doubts Martens's genuine interest in conveying a message or criticizing the image industry because of his position as an artist, which helps him to justify a narcissistic attitude, his careless and detached use of graphic images of human suffering, as well as his cynicism toward Western involvement in the Congo. This dilemma becomes more evident as the neon sign "Please Enjoy Poverty" flashes in the darkness at various townships where Martens travels. While the locals—all non-English speakers—dance frantically around the infamous motto, we know that the sign is made for us, not for the Congolese. Eventually, our anger against the character of Renzo Martens proves to be the quintessential symptom of our own refusal—witting or unwitting—to acknowledge complicity in the reality of poverty. After the film, most of us continue to peruse the news and take no action. In the end, what fails is not only Martens's experiment, but also our cosmopolitan morality and liberal consciousness coupled with the weak and sentimental nature of our pity.

#### Note

1. Stefan Zweig, *Beware of Pity* (New York: Plume Books, 1938/1982), vi.