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The Atrocity Exhibition

By John Douglas Millar

Episode III: Enjoy Poverty is a troubling film about the Congo by Dutch artist Renzo Martens. His modest proposal exposes the inescapable violence that representations of suffering inflict on their subjects. Review by John Douglas Millar

Some Brief Notes on Congolese History

Since its inception the Congo has been raped. Its origins as a state are unique within African history, initiated, as it was, not as a colony but as the personal property of King Leopold II of Belgium; an obscene figure whose 23-year reign was cloaked in the empty rhetoric of humanitarianism but that in reality set in motion the first African holocaust and slashed the population of the Congo by 13 million.

Ivory was the first gold in the region and Leopold's emissaries implemented a system of slave labour and severe corporal punishment in order to achieve quotas. If demands were not met then the villagers' hands were cut off with the Belgian administrators receiving and carefully counting hundreds of baskets of hands per day. With the invention of pneumatic tyres, natural rubber became the key resource and, since then, the Congo has been further mutilated for gold, industrial diamonds, oil, cassiterite and coltan. It was also an ideological battleground during the Cold War. The Pan-Africanist leader Patrice Lumumba was brutally tortured, murdered and dismembered in a CIA- and Belgian-backed overthrow in 1961 and replaced by the incompetent Western puppet, Colonel Mobutu.

[IMAGE]

Image: Renzo Martens, *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*, 2009

The region's recent history has been equally bloody and chaotic and holds a sorry mirror up to the UN, international aid agencies and Western governments. In the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide of the 1990s, the perpetrators poured over the border into Congo, flooding refugee camps and prompting hysterical campaigns by Western aid organisations including Oxfam who, entirely aware that numbers were inflated, saw a cynical opportunity to raise funds. With the backing of Mobutu and the support of a refugee aid budget totalling \$800 million over 12 months, Rwanda carved out a mini state in Kivu setting up their own administration, finances and systems of control.

Under the auspices of rooting out the perpetrators of its own tragedy, Rwanda, in partnership with Uganda, sent troops across the border; troops that bypassed the refugee camps and, demonstrating the Rwandan government's true intent, secured mines and resources in Eastern Congo. The enslaving and mass slaughter of the local population was an inevitable side effect.

In response, Zimbabwe, Namibia and Angola sent in their own armies under the guise of assisting the new President, Laurent-Désiré Kabila, to repel the aggressor. In reality they wanted a share of the bountiful resources that have been a plague to this country since King Leopold demanded a slice of this "magnifique gâteau Africain."

The Congo was now plunged into the deadliest war since the European slaughter of 1939-45, as militias and armies swarmed back and forth across the country murdering, torturing and raping as they went, killing millions. Unsurprisingly, the West did not miss out on the action. The UN reported a "Who's Who" of British, American and Belgian companies that were involved in the illegal exploitation of Congolese mineral resources. Those recommended for further investigation included Anglo-American PLC, Barclays Bank, Standard Chartered Bank and De Beers. To date Western governments have not reacted to the report.

Perhaps the most potent symbol of the Congo are the women in the Panzi hospital in Bukavu who were gang-raped and then shot in the vagina.

Episode III - "Enjoy Poverty"

The "Other", even when not an enemy, is regarded only as one to be seen, not someone (like us) who sees.

One of the many tragic dimensions of Congolese history is that those forced into slave labour, those subjected to the brutal forces unleashed in the search for what is beneath the soil, can have little understanding of the global mechanisms that enslave them including the way their image is exploited by aid systems and the Western media. In an interview conducted by J.J. Charlesworth at the Wilkinson Gallery, the Dutch artist Renzo Martens described reading first hand accounts from the Leopoldian era in which "natives" expressed their incomprehension at the white man's motivations for enslaving them to reap the "black liquid" (natural rubber) from the trees. Martens was being interviewed after a screening of his new film *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*, a film that has stirred a minor controversy in online and print media.

[IMAGE]

Image: Renzo Martens, *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*, 2009

Martens spent two years filming in the Congo and a further year editing on his return to his adopted city of Brussels and since then, even when only a fragment was shown on last years Biennale circuit, the film has produced a flurry of reviews and serious critical engagements.

Structurally, it can roughly be divided into two parts: A first section that appears to function along the lines of a conventional documentary, containing coruscating images of death, starvation and the brutal effects of poverty, and a second part where Martens becomes increasingly and uncomfortably omnipresent. Even in the first section there are jarring atonal elements that suggest Martens is aiming at a form of Brechtian alienation and that begin to reveal a possible design. There is a bizarre sequence in which he is shown walking through a swamp singing Neil Young's "A Man Needs a Maid" while his local black assistants carry his heavy packs and equipment. At all times he seems determined to turn the camera on both himself and the white Western TV crews and photo-journalists that he travels with. In one scene he is shown corpses that are violently contorted in rigamortis and shrouded in flies, but he chooses to turn the camera on the banal scene of white journalist taking a phone call. Burt Stabler has written that "The drama in Martens work is the tension between his strenuous efforts to occupy the centre of the frame, amid the colossal destruction and bloodletting that he has travelled so far to apparently ignore." His intention in the first part of the film seems to be to critique journalistic mechanisms and the politics of the edit, in the second he tackles the possibilities and limits of engaged art.

Martens attempts to delineate the subterfuge inherent in the notion of "objectivity" in Western media channels. Images of post-colonial suffering reproduced by our media outlets are seen to "[grease] the wheels of relief and development, disclosure and justice" and go largely unquestioned.^{vi} In an interview with *Aprior* magazine, Martens discussed the way media is produced in a conflict zone and it is worth quoting at length:

We travel in the shadow of the NGOs, Médecins Sans Frontières or Unicef. So we all get to see the same things. Unicef lead us to a place where food is distributed, Médecins Sans Frontières show us how they care for the sick, and next to the UN convoys you can usually experience something political or violent. That way, the security people ensure that the work of the NGOs is seen by the West, that their logos are photographed and that the Westerners are convinced of their good deeds. Funnily enough, it is only these activities that benefit from press coverage. In other long-term programmes "exploitation of natural resources, starvation on Western-owned plantations and the launches of rebellions, assassinations and coups" the Westerners involved hardly get any media coverage. The NGOs "get" barrels of money thanks to the images that photographers generate of mortally sick or malnourished children, money that they use to expand their projects.

And he goes on:

In fact I find it a very hypocritical situation [...] because none of the profits that these images generate return to the people who deliver the raw material [...]. This makes the exploitation of filmed and photographed poverty a perfect double analogy for rubber, coltan or slave labour.^{vii}

In the interview with Charlesworth, Martens was keen to stress that the film is an artwork, not a documentary, and therefore the gallery was the correct context for the screening. One of its multiple functions is a critique of what he has termed â with a nod to Adorno â the âpoverty industryâ and of the auteur documentary construct, but the essential aim was to probe the edges of what it means for art to be âcriticalâ or âengagedâ, or if such art is possible at all, a question at the forefront of contemporary critical discourse.

[IMAGE]

Image: Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656

Jacques Rancière's book *The Politics of Aesthetics* has become widely influential in cultural academia as a fashionable âgo toâ for approaching these issues. Rancière is sceptical of the notion of engaged art:

It can be said that an artist is committed as a person, and possibly that he is committed by his writings, his paintings, his films, which contribute to a certain type of political struggle. An artist can be committed, but what does it mean to say that his art is committed? Commitment is not a category of art. This does not mean that art is apolitical. It means that aesthetics has its own politics, or its own meta-politics.^{viii}

He goes on to argue that âpolitics has its aesthetics and aesthetics has its politics but there is no formula for an appropriate correlation.â That is to say that a work of art is entirely space/time contingent, it is contextually malleable and so its political weight rises and falls accordingly.

Episode III is fundamentally an investigation of various modes of representation: representation by the media, representation of the artist, and issues around the autonomy of the work of art. Martens has placed himself within the context of European art history by making himself the mediator within the artwork and so placing the work in a line that stretches from Velázquez through Courbet and into the 20th century. Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656) removed the viewer from the privileged position she held outside narrative during the Renaissance. The spectator is now a committed participant in the work. âFoucault understands this painting as the self-representation and self-problematization of representation, revealing both its inner law and the fatal absence at its core.âix Martens himself has said: âVelázquez's *Las Meninas* directly represents this very relationship as the subject of the image. It is about power relations as they exist and how reality is only ever mediated by representation.âx *Episode III* functions similarly to confront the viewer with her involvement in the narrative. To view images of pain and suffering is an ethically complex decision, as it is to write about them. One is

always fundamentally complicit. Martens pulls the dream tube from the back of our heads, he forces the observer to confront their own complicity as a viewer while simultaneously revealing his complicity as a maker. It is a pathologically uncompromising position.

[IMAGE]

Image: Renzo Martens, *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*, 2009

Walter Benjamin wrote that:

If it were the intention of the press to have the reader assimilate the information it supplies as part of his own experience, it would not achieve its purpose. But its purpose is just the opposite, and it is achieved; to isolate what happens from the realm in which it could affect the experience of the reader.^{xi}

That is to say, images and writing depicting suffering do not function as a conduit for reasoned understanding, but rather they act empathetically as channels for heightened emotion and pathos forever in the lee of classical aesthetic functionality. This is the point that Burke makes in his *Philosophical Enquiry* when he suggests we gain pleasure from the distress of others when that distress is represented at an aesthetic distance. Martens continually thanks the malnourished and starving township folk for making him a "better person", for allowing their images to be taken and used to deepen understanding, but as the structure of the film suggests, this being an onanistic function, it changes nothing.

What Martens is seeking is what celebrity cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek has termed an "ethics without narcissism".^{xii} Denouncing the notion of an authentically "felt" empathy as a route to justice, Žižek writes: "the true ethical step is the one BEYOND the face of the other, the one of SUSPENDING the hold of the face. [This] coldness IS justice at its most elementary."^{xiii}

And so what of images and of commitment? It seems that what we are left with is a kind of Socratic dialogue that removes certain layers of bad faith but does not fill the void that they leave vacant. There is also a definite satirical element. In the past the artist has mentioned Swift's "A Modest Proposal", a pamphlet in which in a bravura display of sustained irony, the writer suggested that the starving children of Ireland would make a fine meal for the landlords and policy makers in London. Written in the style of a Latin satire – a two-part structure that first sets out the genuine problem and then suggests a comically inflated solution – *Episode III* could be seen to have a similar architecture. And then what of the contention surrounding the film? Does Martens add to the sum of human suffering that he encounters?

Throughout the film, in an apparent homage to Conrad, the artist carries a large sign up river. Constructed from neon tubing, it reads "ENJOY POVERTY PLEASE". He sets the sign up in various townships along the way, and after giving a brief lecture in which he asks the villagers to take control of their only resource - their poverty - he cranks up a generator and the sign crackles into absurd technicolour. The villagers cannot read English and Martens explains that the sign is for the whites that will see the film in galleries in Europe. Several villagers ask him if he will return to show them the film and Martens tells them that he won't, that he is impotent to help and that they should try to be happy in spite of their circumstances.

[IMAGE]

Image: Renzo Martens, *Episode III: "Enjoy Poverty"*, 2009

Later he gathers a small band of amateur photographers together who take photos of weddings and parties and explains to them that they will make a thousand times their current profit if they take pictures of rape and death. He takes them to various sites of extreme poverty and pain and shows them what images to capture: a starving child, a desperate mother, a dying man and so forth. Later they meet with a representative of Médecins Sans Frontières in an attempt to gain press passes. Martens is blunt to the point of apparent buffoonery: "Can these men have press passes so they can make money from their images?" When the representative explains that of course not, there is no way he could allow people to make money from the suffering he works amongst, Martens counters that it already happens with the white photo crews making huge sums from the images they capture. In the end the Médecins Sans Frontières representative is forced to object on the ground that the images are too amateur, that is to say, it is a matter of aesthetics.

Martens point is well made, but at what cost? It would appear that he knew the request would be denied and the photographers would face complete disappointment. It seems the artist has an almost pathological commitment to the artwork, to the degree that he will ruin lives and court disappointment to elucidate a cynical logic of engagement and make a point about the impotence of engagement. However, therein lies a fundamental issue about the unreliability of the edit. The viewer has only the closed tautology of the artwork on which to make judgements. Martens's relationship to the amateur photographers and any other persons within the film is an editorial construction. In the end the edit is inscrutable.

I am both the observer and the perpetrator of the Africans's exploitation. I can never be the saviour or the emancipator because I am defined by the structures and institutions that exploit in the first place. I can't even pretend that my presence would liberate - even though I lay bare the power relations of the image of poverty within the market economy. The one with the camera will always exploit because of the power relations inherent to taking, distributing and selling images.^{xiv}

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Info

Episode III: âEnjoy Povertyâ was screened at the Wilkinson gallery from 16 January-22 February 2009

Footnotes

i See,

www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/congos-tragedy-the-war-the-world-forgot-476929.html

ii Martin Meredith, *The State of Africa: A History of Fifty Years of Independence*, Free Press, 2005, p.527.

iii Ibid, p.360.

iv Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Penguin, 2003, p.72.

v See, <http://proximitymagazine.com/2008/12/circus-of-suffering/>

vi Ibid.

vii See, <http://www.aprior.com/articles/34>

viii Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Continuum, 2006, p.60.

ix Veronique M. FÃ³ti, âRepresentation Represented: Foucault, Velazquez, Descartesâ, *Postmodern Culture*, Vol 7, no 1, September 1996.

x Frances Guerin. âInterview with Renzo Martensâ, *Artslant*, 2009, <http://www.artslant.com/ny/articles/show/4443>

xi Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken Books, 1969, pp.158-9.

xii See, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/nightwaves/pip/dqr2g/>

xiii Slavoj Å½iÅ¼ek, *The Neighbour: Three Enquiries in Political Theology*, University of Chicago, 2006, p.23.

xiv Guerin, op. cit.

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