Porn Poverty: The Emancipatory Power of Enjoy Poverty

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Moving image documentation of post-colonial realities conceals a paradoxical and complex narrative that is often hidden behind images of poverty, violence and suffering. It is paradoxical because it often lacks reference to post-colonial discourse itself, often portraying the problem superficially, without historical and political context.

Documentary has therefore been considered a reliable medium, thanks to its illusionary realism - often taken for granted- but that can be easily transformed into a metaphorical weapon with which to impose a neo-colonial legacy toward the people it portrays. In this essay I will analyse the controversial and provocative documentary made by the Dutch artist Renzo Martens, Episode 3, also known as Enjoy Poverty (2009), set in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and its alternative and emancipatory critical approach. Because of the multi-layered criticism levelled at the neo-colonial, economic, and cultural systems that expand the inequalities between the North and the South hemispheres of the world, and the problematic concerning its visual representation, Enjoy Poverty can be considered a documentary with a relevant counter-informational potential.

Through a critical analysis of the film, this essay will unfold not only its already highly critical content, but also the other, subtler, criticisms that arise from it. Through an explicit, disturbing and politically incorrect approach, Renzo Martens works to emphasize the western
mass media’s obsession with images of poverty and the misery of so called ‘Third World’ countries, exploring how that precise system of production creates economic and social inequality.¹

Through the descriptions of several fundamental scenes of the documentary and a discussion concerning its critical qualities - as well as its problematic – I aim to show how Enjoy Poverty can be considered a documentary that subverts the superficial realism of the institutional mode of representation, typical of western documentary production.

The 90-minute long film is an unorthodox account of the journey made by the artist to the Congo, in order to show how ‘poverty’ itself has become a commodity in African countries. Therefore, according to the artist/director, Congolese people should take advantage of this culture, as it has proved to be the most profitable resource the country has.²

What makes Renzo Martens approach so provocative and effective is not solely the fragile discourse upon which he builds his work, but particularly his disturbing and crude approach

in addressing the argument with the Congolese people. Through a very direct and tactless mode of engagement, the handled way of film, and the constant use of self-representation within the movie, he is able to construct a subversive and seemingly unethical documentary.\(^3\)

As art historian and cultural critic T.J. Demos writes, “Martens embraces and mimics that media regime in all its spectacular perversity,” \(^4\) and this perversity is accurately deconstructed within the film through a series of performed interventions.

The main discourse developed within the documentary, for which the title stands as a pre-explanatory statement, regards the paradoxical affirmation of poverty as a resource that creates profit. In an interview between Martens and Demos, he asserts: “I initiated an emancipation program that aims to teach the poor how to benefit from their biggest resource: poverty.” \(^5\)

Despite this affirmation sounding like an oxymoron, the theory that Martens’s unfolds in the documentary explains that there are at least two examples in which this economic production can take place. The first and most prominent one concerns the economy originated by the production and circulation of images - portraying misery, poverty, violence and famine - to western countries. Whether those images were photojournalistic, artistic or media productions, they are all visual constructions that trigger an economy in the hegemonic countries in which they are exposed and sold.\(^6\) The criticism that the documentary pinpoints, is that, despite those images being produced within the post-colonies (in the case of \textit{Enjoy Poverty} precisely in the Democratic Republic of Congo) they generate and benefit an

\(^3\) Ruben de Roo, “Immorality as Ethics: Renzo Martens ’Enjoy Poverty,’” in \textit{Art and Activism in the Age of Globalization}. p.143.


economy elsewhere. “The fundamental question is to whom poverty belongs? If it can be sold, it’s important to know who’s the boss, the owner of that poverty.”

In order to enact this statement, Renzo Martens decided to approach Bolingo, a dilapidated Congolese photography agency that usually takes photographs at parties, weddings and other community events of the village. He convinces two young photographers that it would be much more economically beneficial for them to take photographs of the surrounding misery, instead of the happy events of everyday life.

Triggered by the comparison of what an AFP (Agence France-Presse, an international news agency) photographer earns in selling one photograph portraying Congolese poverty (50 euros per shot), Renzo Martens improvises a lesson for the young photographers of Bolongo in which he graphically describes the process of western photojournalism.

Martens advises them to simulate the process in order to produce the same profit as the foreign photojournalists; what they need to do instead of photographing ceremonies is to take

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advantage of what he terms “natural resources”, such as malnourished children and violence, which are so prized by the western media.⁹

The scene develops and the artist walks with the two photographers to a Médecins sans Frontier temporary hospital, where they plan to talk with the director and ask for the permission to let the two young men photograph their patients. It is precisely here that the provocation, as well as the controversy of Martens’ work reaches its peak; the MSF’s doctor refuses his proposal, stating that the idea of permitting photography for commercial purposes is legitimately unacceptable.

What the artist wants to point out through making this provocation, is that the Congolese photographers cannot take advantage of the dramatic situation, while the foreign photojournalists can; they are justified by the necessity of circulating these images in hegemonic countries, in order to sensitize and inform western people and consequently collect money for humanitarian aid organizations such as MSF.¹⁰

Another criticism originated by the film, is toward institutional humanitarian organizations and the ONG practicing in underdeveloped countries such as Democratic Republic of Congo, and their paradoxical ethical part in global economic blackmail.

“Whatever its ambiguities and possible pornographic appeal, the photograph is compelling enough, convincing enough, to shock disinterested observers into wanting to know more of

the event it purports to depict.”11 Within the essay ‘War Trophy Photographs: Proof or Pornography?’ (2012), the professor Hilary Roberts justifies the need to capture images of violence - in this case wars - in order to construct a visual proof of the atrocity, and therefore expand western awareness. This is also the argument made by the MSF doctor within the film to support his negative answer.

According to Martens however, the differences between the western photojournalistic process and the economical reasons posed by the two young photographers, are not so distant: while the first is sanctimoniously considered an unquestionable tool for information, they both share the ultimate result of creating capital.

According to Martens, documentary and photographs do not only work as a medium that exploits poverty to create profit, they can also transform it into a possible artistic and fetishized subject which comes from the saturation of those images within the western media. When Martens goes to visit a photographic exhibition in Kinshasa - that shows black and white images of plantation workers - the viewer realizes the paradoxes of contemporary art itself. The European photographer sublimates the action of working in a plantation through the gaze of his camera, consequently selling his artwork to the non-Congolese community and particularly to plantation owners such as those interviewed by Martens, while buying some photographs for their aesthetic and artistic value. “More than a matter of a local ethical scandal, this scene dramatizes a widespread paradox of contemporary art, particularly that of video and photography. That occurs when ‘concerned’ documentary images, intended to alleviate poverty or work of peace, actually operates as commodity objects and are purchased

by those who encourage or benefit from the very industries of inequality and exploitation against which concerned documentarians justify their practice.”

In order to support Martens discourse, is fundamental to look at the theory of the American writer and cultural critic Susan Sontag. In her book ‘Regarding the Pain of Others’ (2003) she opens a long and articulate critical debate concerning this thesis. In her writing Sontag questions the fragile dynamics that occur within the portrayal and reproduction of images that embody the suffering of “the others”, and for which the western viewer, according to her, has a voyeuristic and debatable attraction. According to Sontag’s theory, images of people suffering can, to a certain degree, be considered as pornographic in the way in which they haunt the western viewer that consumes them as spectacle. What the philosopher and theorist Judith Butler wrote about Sontag’s theory, subsumes the concept behind both Sontag and Martens’ discourse: “In her view, shock itself had become a kind of cliché and contemporary photography tended to aestheticize suffering for the purposes of satisfying a consumer demand - this last function making it inimical and ethical responsiveness and political interpretation alike.”

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14 Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p.75.
15 (Susan Sontag’s view)
The western consumers demand for images of poverty, and the stereotypical representation of the latter are the main argument of *Agarrando pueblo (The Vampires of Poverty)*, another fundamental film work that approaches the discourse around exploitation of poverty via visual documentation.\(^\text{17}\)

*The Vampires of Poverty* is a fictional documentary directed by Luis Ospina and Carlos Mayolo; made in Colombia in 1978, the film is a sharp satire of the conventional type of documentaries that circulated South America during those decades. In his memoir Carlos Mayolo wrote, “Latin America had become the best place for poverty. Obviously the cinema of this era was unable to hide it, nor could it refuse to recognise it. Poverty became the theme.”\(^\text{18}\) He continues, - referring to traditional documentary filmmakers - “They descended on the poor with their cameras, believing that with the simple act of filming, they were making a document about reality.”\(^\text{19}\)


\(^{18}\) Faguet, “Pornomiseria: Or How Not to make a Documentary Film,” p. 67.

\(^{19}\) Faguet, “Pornomiseria: Or How Not to make a Documentary Film,” p. 67.
Triggered by the increasing production of documentaries exclusively portraying Colombia through images of misery and degradation, the two directors decided to provoke the industry by staging a parody of the latter.²⁰ Set in the city of Cali and in Bogotà, the film follows one filmmaker and his cameraman (played by Mayolo and Ospina themselves) while they shoot a documentary on Colombian degradation commissioned by German television. The film appears as an ironical and grotesque provocation in which the two directors aim to embody the idea of the vampires of poverty, those unscrupulous characters whose intention is to construct a moving image product able to satisfy American and European demand. In order to define this specific media attraction toward poverty, Mayolo and Luis Ospina coin the word pornomiseria or porn-poverty²¹, and their documentary, as the writer and curator Michèle Faguet notes, can be considered as an icon of militant cinema that creates counter-images, fundamental for an on-going process of cultural decolonization.²²

The Colombian satirical movie implicitly inspired the work of Renzo Martens, but while they share some peculiarities, they are also extremely different approaches in addressing a similar

²⁰ Faguet, “Pornomiseria: Or How Not to make a Documentary Film,” p. 15.
²¹ Faguet, “Pornomiseria: Or How Not to make a Documentary Film,” p.6.
²² Faguet, “Pornomiseria: Or How Not to make a Documentary Film,” p. 6.
The brilliant ‘film within the film’ formula of *The Vampires of Poverty*, conceals the intention of criticizing a popular production by their own means - emphasizing its limitation and criticality through making visible the paradoxes and hypocrisy of such a superficial mode of representation. On the other hand, *Enjoy Poverty* enacts the same provocation but makes it more controversial and complex. Renzo Martens not only utilizes the same tools to criticize the exploitative hegemonic industry of the media, he also pushes his own performance, constructing a powerful narrative and positioning himself within the structure he criticizes. Martens asserts, “The film indeed embraces its inconsequentiality. It’s quite novel, I think, and not facile or cynical in the least. The piece is a precise seismograph; it quite accurately takes responsibility for the modes of production the medium is entrenched in.”

![Enjoy Poverty, Renzo Martens filming himself, 2008.](image)

The political intervention of Renzo Martens made through the production of *Enjoy Poverty* does not imitate the conventional approach of politically engaged contemporary art; his role as an artist is not limited in the embracing of a political ideology that aims to give voice to the exploited through a visual representation of them. The position of the Dutch artist is more

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articulated and complex. In the essay *The Author as Producer* (1934), the German philosopher Walter Benjamin tried to grasp the relationship between aesthetic and politics through questioning the role of the artist within this cultural exchange. Benjamin believed that, in devoting his production exclusively to a political ideology, the artist will not be able to embody a critical analysis and indeed he will tend to loose his artistic and cultural position.  

“A political tendency, however revolutionary it may seem, has a counter-revolutionary function, as the writer feels his solidarity with the proletariat only in his attitudes, not as a producer.”

According to the art critic Ruben de Roo - and to the discourse unfolded in the previous paragraph - Renzo Martens acts more as a producer of a political discourse rather than as a defender of the Congolese people. His political ideology is questionable and does not embrace an ethical discourse, on the contrary, he produces a politically engaged documentary positioning himself within the same network of power he criticizes.

Another crucial scene of the documentary is when the artist goes to visit the shed of a palm-oil field worker. This man explains to Martens that, with the few dollars he earns per month, he is not able to assure the minimum level of subsistence necessary to feed his children, all of whom are extremely malnourished and ill. Renzo Martens’ response to this demand for help is again detached and crude: he advises him to stop complaining as nothing in his situation will ever change - he is stuck in a state of poverty.

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The response to this affirmation from Martens is what, together with several other provocations, make the film extremely controversial and disturbing to watch. But it is precisely within this tactless and emphatic approach - and in the extreme reactions the piece inspires - that Renzo Martens is able to expand his critique not only toward the vampires of poverty but also to the art world of which he is part and that perpetuates the same exploitative economic system.

Mainly shown in art galleries, the film has been widely criticized by audiences for not giving any solution or alternative to the problems it depicts.28 “Episode 3 is tailored so that the mere act of watching it makes you complicit with its production and for some viewers and critics, this is seen as a manipulative trick. Episode 3 deals with pain, but then doesn’t offer the audience a way out. Watching it does not, in one way or another, resolve it. And that’s quite a shock to many people.”29

Renzo Martens’ purposely crude and honest mode of communication creates a sense of guilt in the viewer: an uncomfortable and barely unacceptable feeling that originates not from the content of the images themselves – images that the western audience constantly sees in everyday life, on television, in newspapers and on the Internet - but from the capacity of the film to accurately deconstruct the visual barriers that have impeded western audiences from grasping subtle neo-colonial dynamics.

Enjoy Poverty’s counter-informational power is therefore entailed within its articulated and complex criticism toward the paradoxes of humanitarian aid, western photojournalism and

politically engaged art practices; as well as in the deconstruction of the ethical discourses embodied by the institutional mode of representation, typical of the western media and documentary form. Through its provocative direct language, the film expanded the debate concerning neo-colonial processes, which, as has been shown, occurred not only through economy but also through cultural and medial imposition.

Highly criticized for its tactless and shocking concept, Enjoy Poverty has become a fundamental document for the emancipation of the western viewer from the hypocrisies of television, newspapers and the Internet. The same viewers who, despite doubts and scepticism, will never be able to look at a politically engaged visual production without questioning the underlying dynamics of power concealed within it.
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