

# INTRODUCTION

20/21

## An Immodest Proposal: Renzo Martens' *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* and the Practice of Critique Anthony Downey

• COMPONENT •

I. Foundation  
(shots 1 – 281)

• STORYLINE •

II. Humanitarian Aid  
and Photography

• MINUTES •

1.46 – 2.39

• SHOTS •

6 – 13

• CONTENT •

Humanitarian aid and  
photography: camera  
records humanitarian  
aid workers handing out  
materials to people and  
photographing them.

• FILM STILL •



It seems quite clear to me that of those of us who feel strongly—whose hearts are moved as well as their heads by this terrible wrongdoing on the Congo—wish to bring home to the public the reality of that wrongdoing, we must unite in an organised association having one clear sole aim—namely to enlighten, systematically and continuously public opinion in this country, and abroad, upon the actual condition of the Congo people under the system of pillage and continuous extortion imposed on them by armed and ruthless force.

—Roger Casement, a letter to William Thomas Stead, Henry Grattan Guinness, and Edmund Dene Morel, March 24, 1908

But about feelings people really know nothing. We talk with indignation or enthusiasm; we talk about oppression, cruelty, crime, devotion, self-sacrifice, virtue, and we know nothing real beyond these words.

—Joseph Conrad, “An Outpost of Progress,” 1897

I first saw a preview of Renzo Martens’ *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* as part of a program at Manifesta 7 in 2008, before seeing the full-length version of the film when it was screened in London in 2009.<sup>\*1</sup> One of the first things I observed—which was evident in both versions—was Martens’ interior monologue and his occasional, often puzzling, comments. Alongside the unapologetic foregrounding of the missionary-like artist, Martens’ utterances seemed designed to manipulate—if not openly antagonize—the viewer: How much of this film was calculated to disturb, if not disorient, the audience, and just how much more of it were we willing to take? This overarching sense of duplicity left me feeling uneasy about the apparently blithe, if not hapless, portrayal of abject poverty and my own personal reaction to it. Who, exactly, was being held to account here: the forces of extractive, globalized capital and its impoverishment of entire communities (rendered all too visibly in the figures of plantation workers producing palm oil and coffee for export

<sup>\*1</sup> The twelve-minute preview version of the film was presented as part of a film program at Manifesta 7 (Trentino–Alto Adige, 2008).

to Belgium), or were we being accused of something—complicity, collusion, indifference—as we sat viewing this film, no doubt comfortably removed in the sanitized space of a gallery or museum?

A lot has changed since I first saw *Enjoy Poverty* more than a decade ago. What has not changed is the critical debates about the film’s intentions and ramifications. Was *Enjoy Poverty* merely heightening—in an unbecoming, occasionally ham-fisted manner—rather than ameliorating the unpalatable realities paraded before us? Was the entire endeavor an opportunistic, insular gesture aimed at an art world that has become increasingly comfortable with images of poverty and death—so long, that is, as they are mediated (and thereafter displaced) through institutional discussions about the politics of representation? Did the film pander to the requirement that the representation of such events provide a degree of catharsis—through transient exposure and illusory closure—that we had become all too familiar with in the context of a museum or institutional space? Was Martens, as some would have it, an imperialist relic; a hapless *ingénue* at best or, at worst, an unedifying anachronism—a throwback to the well-intentioned but thoroughly misguided colonial attitude—roaming alone and lost amid more enlightened approaches to world poverty?<sup>\*2</sup> Although he is admittedly a less demented figure than, say, Klaus Kinski in *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), a character with whom Martens has been compared, he still remains an outlandish presence throughout the film.<sup>\*3</sup> In foregrounding the experience of the white “explorer,” did *Enjoy Poverty* therefore leave itself open to the more explicit criticisms leveled at it by a not insignificant number

<sup>\*2</sup> See: Vivian Zihlerl, “Renzo Martens and the Institute for Human Activities’ ‘A New Settlement,’” *Art Agenda* (May 27, 2015), <http://www.art-agenda.com/reviews/renzo-martens-and-the-institute-for-human-activities-a-new-settlement/>.

<sup>\*3</sup> Premiered in 1982, and the winner of the best director award at Cannes in the same year, *Fitzcarraldo* was written and directed by Werner Herzog and stars Klaus Kinski in the title role. Based on the successful transport of an entire steamboat over a mountain in Peru, it portrays Brian Sweeney Fitzgerald, an Irishman known in the region as Fitzcarraldo. The film attracted much by way of praise and criticism, with one writer, a professor of anthropology, observing claims of Herzog’s mistreatment of the indigenous Aguaruna people, many of whom were hired as extras in the film, and how it was akin to Fitzgerald’s exploitation of indigenous tribes hired to transport the original steamboat. See: Michael F. Brown, “Art of Darkness,” *The Progressive* (August 1982): 20–21. A connection between Martens and Herzog’s various films, including *Fitzcarraldo*, has been made by several observers including, in this present volume, Eyal Weizman and Nina Möntmann, Vivian Zihlerl, and Dan Fox.

of commentators: Who exactly did Martens think he was and what gave him the authority to channel, for whatever reasons, critical or otherwise, one of the stalest tropes of colonial representation?

Despite the film's allusion to the so-called civilizing mission of colonialism, however, there was nothing particularly redemptive about this film. This absence seemed to both mirror the dearth of anything historically redeeming about colonialism and its advocates, but it also made the apparent scandalousness of Martens' central proposal—that the Congolese people should exploit the poverty they endure for profit—all the more difficult to decipher and interpret using traditional critical and interpretive techniques. In co-opting the language of capitalist self-help diktats—encouraging local people to not only “enjoy” their poverty but to profit from it and become, in turn, entrepreneurs and curators of their own impoverishment—was Martens' quixotic pragmatism, wittingly or otherwise, predisposed to reenacting the more unscrupulous forms of instrumentalization that underwrite the logic of neo-liberalism? Did *Enjoy Poverty*, as many of its critics asked, do anything different from other more blatant forms of artistic provocation and, if it did, what exactly constituted that difference?

Investigating the economic value of one of the Democratic Republic of the Congo's most lucrative exports (specifically, poverty), the questions raised by *Enjoy Poverty* continue to represent a landmark interjection into debates about contemporary art's relationship to images of poverty and exploitation. The unconventional representation of acute hardship throughout the film also continues to generate debate about how deprivation is portrayed within mainstream media and global cultural institutions—within, that is, economies that prosper on such images. It has likewise altered the critical landscape within which such images are produced and understood. If we consider the manner in which critiques of *Enjoy Poverty* have moved from broadly formal, ethical considerations about the film's motives to concerns about the broader systemic issues relating to exploitative economies within the art world, then it is also a measure of how far the debates have shifted over time. While the spectrum of response generally tends toward protest (in the form of broad opprobrium) and enthusiasm (for the film's unconventional approach to criticality) in more or less equal measure, this enduring absence of consensus is telling and needs to be considered in its own right. It is with this and other points in mind that the contributions presented throughout *Critique in Practice*,

alongside their framing, are predominantly concerned with giving a clearer sense of what is at stake in the film and, by extension, the range of critical responses to it. What, this volume asks, can these arguments, for and against *Enjoy Poverty*, reveal to us about this groundbreaking film and the general support, incredulity, not to mention censure, that it invited and continues to attract to this day?

### Who Benefits from the Work of Art?

Compiling historical and more recent forms of critical analysis relating to the film and its legacy, *Critique in Practice* admittedly assumes a degree of familiarity with the film's premise. It is perhaps therefore appropriate to remind readers of some of the key moments in the narrative, if only to recall its visceral (if not eviscerating) impact. From the hacking sounds of a machete in the opening scenes, the film is discombobulating from the outset. A plantation worker complains exasperatedly—and fruitlessly—of the impossible demands placed upon him as a casual worker, before observing that “it takes three days to make half a dollar.” The same worker will later feed his children on a meager portion of bread and some manioc leaves, and give a dead mouse to his visibly malnourished daughter, which she duly consumes. Elsewhere, smiling humanitarian workers photograph recipients of food aid while Martens, with the assistance of an assortment of helpers and guides, sets off with a neon sign into the Congolese countryside. A journalist, photographing an impassive man dwelling in a refugee camp, announces that the man's pose, in all its abjection, is “fantastic,” and one that will no doubt appeal to news desks and editors worldwide. Coverage of a World Bank conference shows a cavalcade of Mercedes-Benz cars converging in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). In the ensuing press conference following the event, a representative from the World Bank, in what we can only imagine to be an off-guard moment, appears to agree with Martens' question from the floor: the development aid agreed to by international donors at the meeting on that day, amounting to 1.8 billion US dollars, outstrips the combined export of copper, coltan, and diamonds from the DRC.<sup>\*4</sup> An exhibition of photographs of impoverished plantation employees is held in a smart, well lit, white space, with one plantation owner—Mr. Blattner—purchasing three pictures

An Immodest Proposal:  
Renzo Martens' *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* and  
the Practice of Critique  
Anthony Downey

<sup>\*4</sup> The delegate in question was Onno Ruhl, who was then the World Bank country manager for the DRC. He is currently the World Bank country director for India.

because they depict some of his workers. We learn that certain plantations, based in Ndeke and Lisafa in particular, have higher percentages of malnourished children than elsewhere. A starving child, with facial sores, swollen eyes, and an abscessed anus, is shown to us (we have seen her earlier eating a dead mouse for nourishment), as her father (seen earlier working in a field) professes his despair at her condition. We leave her sitting motionless, awake (according to her father she has stopped sleeping), and downcast in a darkness illuminated only by a camera light. We learn from a local doctor that children of plantation workers are more likely to be malnourished than those of farmers and, in fact, most of them are underfed if not emaciated. Mr. Blattner, the owner of a local plantation and purchaser of the three photographs mentioned earlier, extols the well-maintained aspect of his holdings and—proudly displaying them to Martens—expounds on the “artistic” elements of the photographs he has bought, while quantifying the incidence of malnourishment on his plantations in terms of relative percentages. A listless emaciated child suffering from edema, hypoglycemia, and weight loss, stares at her mother in a hospital. She is treated with a mixture of water and sugar but we are told, by the attendant doctor, that she will die. The camera lingers on her death throes, her breath labored and slowing, and then, later in the film, we watch as she does indeed die. We are, at this stage, less than twenty-five minutes into a film that is roughly ninety minutes long and we have yet to mention the humanitarian workers distributing aid and, while doing so, utilizing the moment to further “brand” the aid agency in question with a prominent display of its logo; nor have we mentioned the journalists photographing refugees and corpses—murdered by local militia—for profit, while local people, who are controversially given lessons by Martens on how to photograph similar scenes and market the subsequent images, fail to sell their work. Toward the film’s end, Martens, his press card and journalists’ credentials having been revoked (no doubt for his impertinence in questioning the motivations of other journalists), prepares a meal for one of the plantation worker’s children and, later still, the neon sign observed earlier—displaying the words “Enjoy (please) Poverty”—beams radiantly, if incongruously, in the pitch black night sky.\*<sup>5</sup>

It would be convenient at this stage to say that the gist of the film—*poverty needs to be understood as a viable resource*—is frankly disagreeable and that we need to remain guarded against not only accepting it but considering it to be a viable proposal. I, for one, would

have initially preferred to understand the film’s overarching message as a facetious affront, something ridiculous and almost laughable, and thereafter an ill-timed or ill-judged interjection into a most serious matter. And perhaps that is, in part, what provokes some viewers of the film: its sheer unpalatability. It is indeed an immodest proposal, shamelessly laying bare not only abject destitution but, frankly, a preposterous, insulting solution for those affected by it: *enjoy your poverty; treat it as a resource, everyone else is*. Many of the early reviews collected here in the first section of this volume pointed toward that preposterousness (see Dan Fox, for example); whereas some supported the provocation that underwrote it (JJ Charlesworth, for example). Others remarked how numerous artists and practitioners have drawn attention to the way in which poverty is represented and have sought, in turn, to undermine tropes of victimhood and spectacle, so much so that it has become a commonplace sign of critical engagement and a core institutional gambit (Frank Vande Veire, Niels Van Tomme, and Matthias De Groof). Martens’ film, for early commentators (see Els Roelandt, Paul O’Kane, Ruben De Roo, and T.J. Demos, for example), appeared to be attempting something systemic and critically self-reflexive rather than just endorsing provocation for its own sake. Other concerns were raised about the film’s ethics (Nato Thompson) and, more specifically, Martens’ apparent self-absorption (Vivian Zihlerl). Observers such as Katerina Gregos, cited in the opening pages of this volume, openly questioned the illusion of empowerment that is dangled before plantation workers in the film; whereas Eunsong Kim, quoted at the outset of Gregory Sholette’s essay, also included here, suggested that Martens’ ambition in *Enjoy Poverty*—in relation to the systemic global problems of the world—appears to be “to make more of them.” I should note here that we approached a further number of authors who have been openly critical of *Enjoy Poverty* and Martens more generally, in public events and talks, but they declined our invitation citing, variously, that they did not think their comments needed elaborating upon and that they did not want to add to the publicity that the film has already attracted. We of course are supportive of such decisions and fully respect the reasons behind them.

An Immodest Proposal:  
Renzo Martens’ *Episode  
III: Enjoy Poverty* and  
the Practice of Critique  
Anthony Downey

\*<sup>5</sup> The man we see working on the plantation, and his children, were based in Ndeke and Lisafa. Blattner’s plantation is situated near Basankusu. The images of aid distribution were filmed near Goma, while the international press photographers were working near Kanyabayonga. The malnourished child died in a hospital in Basankusu. The final destination of the neon sign in the DRC was Ndele, near Bunia.

Nevertheless, this spectrum of response is instructive, revealing as it does a number of ways to approach *Enjoy Poverty* as a film but also as a critical framework for understanding broader issues. The second section of *Critique in Practice* seeks to reflect back on this range of responses from a more contemporary perspective and, thereafter, outline some potential critical positions from which to understand the film's longer-term impact and legacy. Discussing the extent to which *Enjoy Poverty* can progress a radical critique of the conditions Martens encounters, k̄arî'k̄ach̄ä seid'ou and Jelle Bouwhuis scrutinize the extent to which he effectively straddles the conflictual roles of both Tintin (figured here as agent of exploitation) and the well-meaning colonial reporter (understood here in the guise of Sergei Tretyakov, the denounced playwright and erstwhile special correspondent for *Pravda*). For Eva Barois De Caebel, *Enjoy Poverty* offers a critical opportunity to engage in questions of epistemic violence and the often-reductive processes of legitimation in use throughout discussions of art from the continent of Africa. Kolja Reichert investigates Martens' instructions to Congolese photographers—specifically, that they access the Western market of poverty photography—and what frameworks of analysis can adequately engage with the import of such advice in relation to the individuals affected by it; namely, Congolese people. My own essay offers a polemical account of what we potentially need to consider when we apply ethical approaches to *Enjoy Poverty*, and the degree to which “ethics” as a critical term can introduce a binary over-determination of what constitutes politically effective (successful) and politically ineffective (unsuccessful) artworks. Throughout Pieter Van Bogaert's contribution, a critical debate emerges as to what the goal of critical exteriority would amount to—and, indeed, if it can be achieved—in relation to *Enjoy Poverty*. Returning to the candid criticism of humanitarianism expressed throughout the film, Nina Möntmann and Eyal Weizman discuss the long-term implications of the film's central premise on Martens' work more broadly and the development of his subsequent projects in the DRC.

Following its release and dissemination, it is fair to say that, despite many critical reservations, *Enjoy Poverty* not only changed how we look at representations of poverty (and questioned subsequent forms of cultural engagement with deprivation), it also indicated how the very act of showing such impoverishment—in the so-called white cube viewing spaces of western Europe and North America—brought added value to the venues exhibiting such works

and not, in any real sense, to the people depicted in the film. And this was not simply about raw capital, although that played an admittedly significant role; rather, it was about how the accrual of cultural value segues into actual capital. The (re)presentation of the effects that extractive capital have upon the livelihoods of communities who exist beyond legal and economic representation—when shown in cultural institutions—indelibly transmutes into accumulative capital where we, the audience, gallery owners, gallery employees, critics, curators, speculators, investors, collectors, artists, and so on, directly and indirectly gain from it in multiple and, indeed, multiplying ways. Consider, for one, the extended economy of remuneration that services art-world institutions, from the transit of art to its sale at auction; from its purchase by collectors to the insurance premiums to be paid on it; from the art critic's review to the academic's essay (including, of course, this offering before you and, by extension, this volume of essays); from the local art handlers to the international financial organizations channeling monies into purchases of artworks that sometimes do not even find their way outside of the tax havens and free trade zones to which they are consigned. Consider, furthermore, how gallery spaces and cultural organizations are often on the vanguard of forces of gentrification—benefiting property speculators and investors alike—that profit the immediate areas where cultural institutions are located. This is an admittedly cursory overview of the economic network and institutional processes that support and maintain contemporary art as a practice but the point is simple enough: there is a profit to be made from exhibiting images of poverty (and the representation of destitution and privation more generally) that proves to be extensive and expanding—that is, if you are not actually subjected to that poverty yourself or, pointedly, the subject of a film about its ravages. Was the film's modest proposal therefore not so much the suggestion that local Congolese people working on plantations needed to capitalize on their poverty but something potentially more insidious; specifically, that we were to all intents and purposes capitalizing on it too, and continuing, in the case of the DRC, a historical mechanism of exploitation albeit in a different guise? Were we extracting, and thereafter disseminating, images of poverty in a process that not only gave them financial value but a cultural value that could be amassed, if not stockpiled, by anyone exhibiting or critically engaging with them?

In investigating the extent to which the material reality of contemporary forms of cultural production are indelibly

imbricated within, if not directly supported by, the systems they discursively critique, Martens could be seen to both reify—and exemplify—precisely that very conundrum while offering, we could argue, a damning critique of it. And this, conceivably, is what constitutes its radical difference to what had gone before: its overt, frank, and scrupulous admission of complicity in the very systems it ostensibly set out to critique. The contradictions that underwrite *Enjoy Poverty* arguably expose not only the patterns of complicity that are involved in the poverty flaunted before us, but also our (dis)avowed complicity in it too, not least when we consider how we directly and indirectly benefit from it. Where you stand on the matter will be, in part at least, defined by your own sense and understanding of individual complicity and how that complicates any simplistic analyses of Martens' motivations and intentions. The question is thereafter relatively straightforward: How can the gesture of admitting complicity become something more than mere gesture? If we can progress a more radically transformative intervention into the conditions we witness in the film, Martens seems to tentatively propose, then could we more candidly and productively address a key question of our time: Who really benefits from the *work* of art?

If art as a practice does indeed critique inequality while simultaneously reinforcing the conditions under which it thrives, it is not only an instrument in the convenient illusion of political engagement and moral responsiveness, it is an endemic, facilitative part of that very system of exploitation. Which leads us to a perhaps less straightforward question, and the focus of section three of this book: What new systems and infrastructures need to be developed to contest this established theater of inequality? Throughout this final section, which ends with Martens' recently revised version of a text relating to his current project in the DRC, authors examine how critique reacts and reflects upon *Enjoy Poverty's* relationship to the subject of humanitarianism (J. A. Koster); the ideology and economy of the gift in the context of so-called development aid (Ariella Aisha Azoulay); the ramifications of installing a “white cube” space, as Martens has done, on a former Unilever-owned plantation in the DRC (Suhail Malik); and what role, if any, the film has had in formulating a transformative politics in the face of the models of extractive capital that maintain our globalized systems of exchange and exploitation (Angela Dimitrakaki). Elsewhere in this section, Gregory Sholette explores the degree to which Martens' film replays historical arguments around the subject of “negative cultural capital,” and if it can be understood as a “variant of

this still-germinating sphere of engagement.” In all of these attempts to think beyond the film, authors link Martens' endeavors after the release of *Enjoy Poverty* to his program in the DRC, specifically those that have emerged under the banner of Human Activities—a project formerly known as the Institute for Human Activities—and its construction of a “white cube” space on a former plantation. If the disavowal or absence of legal and political representation is a feature of being a plantation worker in an expanding economy of exploitation (where the worker is exploited once through the means of production and again through the means of representation), then what happens, this latter project appears to ask, when artistic practice—in the form of a “white cube”—is inserted into this already compromised regime of extractive capital? It would seem that this question not only lies at the center of Martens' more recent projects but found significant momentum in relation to the responses to *Enjoy Poverty* and, no doubt, the experience of producing such a film in the first place.

### Eat the Poor

In these debates about practice and critique (which fit neatly into the often abstract priorities of art-world discourses), it is easy to forget a number of key realities that *Enjoy Poverty* not only referenced from the outset but made evident in the overarching frames of subsequent debate that followed in its wake. One of those realities is the sheer scale of impoverishment in the DRC. Widely considered to be the richest country in the world when we survey its reserves of natural resources, the DRC's untapped deposits of raw minerals alone are estimated to be worth in excess of 24 trillion US dollars.<sup>\*6</sup> Despite this, as of 2017 it was ranked 176 out of 188 countries on the UN Human Development Index, with 77 percent of the population surviving on less than 1.90 US dollars a day.<sup>\*7</sup> Notwithstanding its vast wealth in terms of resources, the political instability brought about by external and internal forces often vying for access to those minerals has brought the DRC to the brink of collapse. Precarious national infrastructure, historically embedded forms of extractive capitalism, internecine violence, and rampant

<sup>\*6</sup> See: “Democratic Republic of the Congo: Economy,” globalEDGE website, <https://globaledge.msu.edu/countries/democratic-republic-of-the-congo/economy>.

<sup>\*7</sup> See: “Human Development Index (HDI),” Human Development Report Office (HDRO) website, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-index-hdi>.

corruption all conspire to impoverish the country further. It has become, in the words of Andreas Exenberger and Simon Hartmann, “an almost ‘perfectly’ failing state.”<sup>\*8</sup> To read such opinions and observe such realities, portraying as they do the vertiginous relationship between imminent wealth and unprecedented poverty, can be overwhelming. They can produce cognitive dissonance and an accompanying sense of futility: How can such apparent wealth produce such misery? To these details, we need to add the following: it is widely estimated that the DRC receives 1.8 billion US dollars in overseas aid per year, while its three main exports are cobalt (\$1.9 billion), refined copper (\$1.79 billion), and copper ore (\$960 million).<sup>\*9</sup> This would conceivably mean that the management of poverty, the distribution of aid and the logistics of administering it, attract a sum of money that is comparable to—if not potentially greater—that of the DRC’s largest export, namely, the mining of cobalt.<sup>\*10</sup> Which means, apropos Martens’ central point in *Enjoy Poverty*, that Congolese people arguably *do* need to further exploit their relationship to impoverishment and its attendant privations if, that is, they want to attract more development aid alongside capital investment. But is that, we need to ask as we read this volume and look at the film again, really what Martens is promoting? Is he saying that the only way out of this destitution is the frankly shameful proposal that Congolese people wallow

<sup>\*8</sup> Andreas Exenberger and Simon Hartmann, “The Dark Side of Globalization: The Vicious Cycle of Exploitation from World Market Integration: Lesson from the Congo,” *Working Papers in Economics and Statistics* (Innsbruck: University of Innsbruck, 2007), 1–23.

<sup>\*9</sup> It is difficult to get exact figures relating to DRC exports and these figures would appear to contradict those offered by Onno Ruhl, see above, in the early stages of the film. See: “Democratic Republic of the Congo,” The Observatory of Economic Complexity website, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/cod/>.

<sup>\*10</sup> Although variable, it is generally accepted that most foreign “investment”—that is material and capital extraction—in the mining industries, which represent the highest profit yields across the DRC, is led by the following national interests: Canadian companies (of which there are nine); Australian companies (six in total); South African companies (three in total); companies in the United Kingdom and the United States (numbering two each); and one each from China, Japan, Morocco, and Switzerland. For a fuller picture of mining concessions in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, see: Alexandre Jaillon, Fiona Southward, and IPIS, “Mineral Supply Chains and Conflict Links in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo,” IPIS website (November 25, 2015), <http://ipisresearch.be/publication/mineral-supply-chains-and-conflict-links-in-eastern-democratic-republic-of-congo/>.

in their impoverishment or is the very thought—in its all too repellent and nauseating reality—supposed to provoke something else?

One of the recurring elements in critiques of *Enjoy Poverty* has been the observation of its Swiftian motivations.<sup>\*11</sup> It is therefore worth observing what “A Modest Proposal,” Jonathan Swift’s 1729 pamphlet can tell us—in its indictment of political expediency in the face of immeasurable misery—about the narrative tone and style of digression in *Enjoy Poverty*. The formal use of satire in Swift’s pamphlet is often understood to be in the tradition of Juvenal, who wrote the *Satires* in the early second century AD. Largely devoid of humor, Juvenalian satire is laced with vituperation. It is a form of rage given vent through ironic overstatement, sarcastic indignation, and biting denunciation. It is, in short, a savage form of satire where Juvenal deployed a series of seemingly logical yet absurd declarations to effect a particular function: to bring to account (if not finish off) those whom he considered to be a threat to the well-being of society and the commonwealth of the people. Swift, in taking on the mantle of Juvenal, attempted to achieve something similar: his satire is an astute and judicious form of social criticism that, by pushing apparently logical conclusions to the limit, revealed the absurdity of his opponent’s views and effectively dismantled the object of his ire.

This is arguably what attracts Martens to the Swiftian form of critique: this is not just satire, it is a humorless, *reductio ad absurdum* approach to an issue that needs to be radically reframed if we are to fully engage with the ramifications—however unpalatable they may appear—of re-presenting poverty in the context of contemporary art and its institutions. A *reductio ad absurdum* argument pushes logic to its limit, just as Swift does in “A Modest Proposal.” It identifies a statement that is

<sup>\*11</sup> Jonathan Swift’s pamphlet, the full title of which is “A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People from Being a Burthen to Their Parents or Country and for Making Them Beneficial to the Publick,” was published anonymously in 1729. The text proposed that the poor of Ireland could ease their economic troubles by selling their children as food to those with more means and resources. In doing so, the pamphlet argued, they would also unburden the political class of their responsibility for the welfare of the impoverished and give the poor monies with which to buy food and other goods. Needless to say, upon its publication it attracted much by way of condemnation. Contributors to this volume, including Els Roelandt and T.J. Demos, have noted the significance of Swift’s pamphlet as a reference point, if not source, for Martens’ film. For Martens’ views on Swift, see his interview in this volume with Ana Teixeira Pinto.

not obviously false—*minimizing the poor will reduce the burden of poverty on both the poor and those charged with their welfare*—and combines it with other proclamations that are clearly true—*less mouths to feed would equal less hunger*—and then produces, by way of a believable thesis, a conclusion that is not just a contradiction but patently absurd: eating the first born of the Irish poor will alleviate their suffering and, indeed, the burden they placed upon British landlords who remained, then, largely *in absentia*. Is, we need to ask, Martens’ proposal offering precisely such a logic, an extreme reduction of truth to an absurdity that, ultimately, denounces both the conditions wrought by globalized forms of extractive capital, the complacency of an art world willing to consume such images, and our abject refusal to contemplate the sinuous forms of complicity that operate in the systemic economy—be it institutional, critical, or investment-based—that thrives on their circulation?

While Swift’s text has become a byword for zealous political expediency, and *Enjoy Poverty* has taken up the gauntlet in respect of both modest and immodest proposals, it is perhaps fitting to remember here the work carried out in 1903 by Roger Casement in what was then known as the Congo Free State.<sup>\*12</sup> At the time, the Congo was effectively the private colony of Belgium’s King Leopold II, who oversaw the rapacious extraction of natural resources from the region under conditions of extreme violence and oppression. The brutality of this colonial venture, which involved floggings, torture, infanticide, amputations, forced labor, rape, widespread killings, and the enslavement of men, women, and children, was investigated by Casement when he was appointed British Counsel to the Congo Free State in 1903. The so-called “Casement Report,” published in 1904, presaged the end of Leopold’s rule, forensically detailing as it did the full extent of the atrocities being committed in the Congo. The epigraph to this essay, written four years after the release of his report, is an extract from a letter written by Casement exactly 100 years prior to the release of Martens’ film. The

<sup>\*12</sup> Roger Casement (1864–1916) was, like Jonathan Swift (1667–1745) before him, born in Dublin to an Anglo-Irish family. In 1903, he was commissioned by the British government to travel to the Congo Free State, as it was then known, to investigate King Leopold II’s rule over the country. It is widely agreed that Joseph Conrad, having met Casement in the Congo in 1890, used him as the basis for the character of Marlow in his novella *Heart of Darkness*, first published in 1899. For an unsurpassed account of Casement’s work in the Congo, see: *The Eyes of Another Race: Roger Casement’s Congo Report and 1903 Diary*, eds. Séamas Ó Síocháin and Michael O’Sullivan (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2004).

letter in question was written to William Thomas Stead (1849–1912), a pioneer of investigative journalism, and the founders of the Congo Reform Association (CRA), Henry Grattan Guinness (1861–1915) and Edmund Dene Morel (1873–1924). Today the CRA is considered to be a forerunner to human rights advocacy groups and, under the pressure of Casement’s damning report, its historical lobbying of the British government in the early part of the twentieth century, and the shifts in public opinion as a result, did for a time improve the conditions under which Congolese people lived. However, as we now know, through the assiduous research of authors such as Jules Marchal (1924–2003), Leopold’s withdrawal from the Congo did not result in the end of exploitation; on the contrary, it invited others who had worked with him—such as Lord Leverhulme—to impose further conditions of forced labor upon the Congolese population.<sup>\*13</sup> The violence of Leopold’s tyranny, its calculated, expedient, murderous intent, was transfigured into that of Leverhulme’s apparently more “humane,” but nonetheless calculating and unrelenting, approach to exploitation.<sup>\*14</sup> And throughout the one constant that remains, it would seem, involves the logic of extractive capital that is repeatedly expressed in the necropolitics of the plantation.<sup>\*15</sup> In light of the coordinated power of the plantation to deprive entire populations of life, it would be all too easy here to throw our hands up and engage in yet another bout of moral throat clearing about the repeated and systemic exploitation of the DRC and how nothing has changed since. But, a century on from Casement’s searing indictment of Belgian rule, and the conditions that have ensured since, we may want to ask a more pointed question: What will it take to blast open the continuum of immiseration in the DRC?

## A Modest Critique

The systematic extraction of wealth and the destabilization of the DRC reverberates throughout

<sup>\*13</sup> See: Jules Marchal, *Lord Leverhulme’s Ghosts: Colonial Exploitation in the Congo* (London: Verso, 2017). This extraordinary indictment of the working practices employed by Leverhulme’s enterprises was originally published as: *Travail forcé pour l’huile de palme de Lord Leverhulme: L’histoire du Congo 1910–1945* (Borgloon: Editions Paula Bellings, 2001).

An Immodest Proposal:  
Renzo Martens’ *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* and  
the Practice of Critique  
Anthony Downey

<sup>\*14</sup> It is on one of Lord Leverhulme’s former plantations in Boteka that Martens chose to initiate his “reverse gentrification” program in 2017. *Enjoy Poverty* began its journey on the Ndeke and Lisafa plantations, which are both located close to Boteka.



discussions of *Enjoy Poverty*, a film that refuses both the pieties of humanitarian aid, journalistic responsibility, and the claims of engagement that underwrite significant practices within contemporary art and its institutions. Political engagement, be it with the politics of displacement, dispossession, colonialism, neoliberalism, late capitalism, globalization, climate change, and so forth, tends to confer a degree of credibility that appeals to artists, institutions, and audiences alike. The transitive sequencing of affective representations, cathartic gestures, nominal commitment, and symbolic engagement represents an alliance of complicities that therefore needs to be disrupted. All of which leaves us with a parting question: Does *Enjoy Poverty* disrupt this sequencing and offer a critical framework—however partial and problematic—to rearticulate these debates in a more radical, and hopefully transformative manner? What, in the face of such apparently insurmountable odds, does it propose we do when everything else appears to have thus far failed? In embracing the potential of admitting complicity, among other things, does it offer a means to reframe certain questions in a manner that proposes something beyond mere gesture? And if so, what exactly is the basis and potential impact of its immodest proposal on the very people it has chosen to represent?

This volume, finally, was initiated in 2012 when Martens approached Els Roelandt to edit it. In the interim, Roelandt and Eva Barois De Caevel, both contributors to this volume, published *CATPC—Congolese Plantation Workers Art League* in 2017, which was dedicated to an exhibition of work by Congolese plantation workers at the SculptureCenter in New York in the same year. With the continued assistance and input of Roelandt, Martens, and Laurens Otto, I assumed editorship of the volume in

<sup>15</sup> It was Achille Mbembe, in his essay on the necropolitics of enslavement and “states of exception,” who argued that—under the law of a sovereign and unaccountable power—capital extraction equals death for those who inhabit the plantation. Specifically referencing Angola and the DRC, Mbembe observes how “the concentration of activities connected with the extraction of valuable resources around these enclaves has, in return, turned the enclaves into privileged spaces of war and death. War itself is fed by increased sales of the products extracted. New linkages have therefore emerged between war making, war machines, and resource extraction.” See: Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 33. I have addressed Martens’ work elsewhere in relation to “states of exception” and Giorgio Agamben’s theory of *homo sacer*. See: Anthony Downey, “Exemplary Subjects: Camps and the Politics of Representation,” *Giorgio Agamben: Legal, Political and Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Tom Frost (Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2013), 119–42.

2017 and what the reader now has in front of them is, to all intents and purposes, a collective effort to give voice to the many responses—positive and negative—that *Enjoy Poverty* has elicited over the last decade or so. Despite this apparently lengthy period of gestation, the seven years between the book’s original inception and publication has allowed further voices to come forward—but not all, as the next volume in this series will look to engage more fully with plantation employees and other collaborators who are currently working with Martens in the DRC—and, in part, other debates to come into focus around its legacy and impact on Martens’ own practice. On the occasion of the book’s publication, we are likewise pleased to note that the film is now available to view in its entirety here: [www.enjoypoverty.com](http://www.enjoypoverty.com).