

RENZO MARTENS - EPISODE III

Introduction to a conversation with Renzo Martens in Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam

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The purpose of this afternoon's session is to unpack some of the issues which arise from a viewing of Renzo Martens's recent work *Episode III* from a fine art and documentary perspective. The work is deliberately provocative, indeed offensive in many parts, and I would prefer to discuss this aspect of the work indirectly, since I think that may help us understand something about the complex emotions it produces for us. If we move head on into content I don't think we will get very far.

I agreed to be involved in this discussion not because I like the work – I think 'like' is an irrelevant category in this discussion, but because of its interest in the challenge it presents to the audience. I also thought the discussion might help me understand a little more about the relatively new genre of what one might call the distressed (or distressing) documentary, a form which is designed to provoke, irritate indeed perhaps enrage the audience. One might think about the origin of this genre in terms of a crisis in the documentary genre itself.

A few words on its history are perhaps in order. First to recall the ethnographic aspect of the early silent newsreels which gathered images from exotic locations around the world, an extension of the mission of still photography more or less coterminous with the enterprise of colonialism itself. Second the tripartite division of the field which developed between the world wars – between the committed documentaries of, say, Joris Ivens and those represented by the work of John Grierson who wanted to use documentary to inform, educate and integrate a working class audience into liberal democracies. Both Grierson and Ivens wanted the audience to understand more about the construction of social reality. However Ivens, romantic as he may have been in his communism, was more oppositional. The third trend (just for reference) would be the development of right wing propaganda newsreels, for instance in Nazi Germany.

Documentary is in fact a portmanteau term, covering a range of aesthetics, subgenres and political positions. Indeed you might want to argue that the development of photography and then of documentary cinema provoked a psychoanalytic crisis about how we understand reality, a crisis to which generations of filmmakers provide individual responses.

Whatever the case, these approaches involved an aesthetic structure which allowed the audience to orientate themselves.

The development of more mobile cameras and the aesthetic of cinema vérité lead to a different kind of interrogative cinema. The founding film of cinema vérité, *Chronique d'un été* (1961) was a philosophical film and also an early example of the genre of reverse ethnography which its director, Jean Rouch, was to continue to develop (the film turned the camera on working class people in the first world and asked them not about their material condition but about the nature of happiness). In fact this is something Martens and I could discuss in a bit – why not have a philosophical discussion with his Congolese subjects?

I myself am not interested in questions as to whether *Episode III* is a good or bad work. At a guess I would say that it is (in quotation marks) not a very "good" documentary since it doesn't really add anything to the language of documentary film, but an

“interesting” work of art because of the questions of ego, agency and spectatorship it raises.

What is most difficult about the work as it seems to me is not its depiction of poverty, though despite the harrowing nature of some of the scenes, these are clearly designed as part of a debate about what images generate foreign aid (and generate aid fatigue), particularly images of starving children. What is most difficult is that it forces the viewer to take up the position of a perpetrator, of someone committing crimes against humanity, not through murder, rape and looting but, as the artist implies, through journalism and art. We may not like the film, but by putting himself in the frame in the way he does the artist presents a version of the artist as egoist as a cynical comment not just on his own endeavours, but on our relation to this subject also.

The work constantly oscillates between an acute analysis of the dilemmas of foreign aid and intervention and the need to expose their bad faith, through carefully conducted interviews (for example with the director of the hospital who distinguishes between photographs shot by professional (no doubt mainly white) photographers for “communication” and those of his amateur group whom he is training to think as if they are part of this communication industry. Martens the artist represents our bad faith. Of course – and this is the clever part – by exaggerating the moral hypocrisy of his character he invites us to distance ourselves from the position he is taking. In fact I think it is more useful if we stay with the character and the message he is taking to the Congo – enjoy poverty, because that’s all you will ever have!

What is this film doing here, indeed what are we doing here discussing it. Opening the Amsterdam documentary film festival it signifies to my mind that there is something of a crisis in the notion of the documentary, and the organisers have selected this film as representing one of the ways out of the crisis (artist’s documentaries). Indeed Martens is not the first artist to work in such abject territory – Alfredo Jaar’s *Rwanda Project* (1994-2000) is an example. Jaar’s work is more conceptual, in the way it refrains from representing the image of carnage in *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* (1996) for example.

In the art world – here in the Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam – a set of other debates concerning politics, aesthetics and commitment constantly recur, even though I think they are as much a symptom of the failures of our democracies and civil societies as any solution. We like to think that our donations to charitable causes, and the many hours we put in reading the quality newspapers make us more concerned and responsible citizens. They may do so, but they have no impact on humanitarian disasters unfolding in other parts of the world. Indeed if Martens’s film is any indication, art just makes matters even worse. It is perhaps helpful to think of Martens’s project as a modern form of polemic, in the spirit of Jonathan Swift’s 1729 “A Modest Proposal For Preventing The Children of Poor People in Ireland From Being A burden to Their Parents or Country, and For Making Them Beneficial to The Public” in which he suggests that the solution to the famine might be to eat Irish children.

The only difference arises – and this is where I part company – is that as a modern day Swift, Martens presents his depressing assessment not to the British ruling class but directly to the African people he meets, and we witness their visible shock and depression implicated as we are in this cruel deception.

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