

MURRAY WHYTE
VISUAL ARTS CRITIC

For those of you who missed the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery's enthralling, more-than-occasionally troubling, video-heavy show "Models for Taking Part" last fall, here's your chance to revisit what I thought was its most troubling, and most brilliant, portion: *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*, a film by Dutch artist Renzo Martens that used absurd hyperbole to prove a point to an unnervingly distant extreme.

Martens is in town this week to talk about the film on Tuesday, but first, on Monday, the gallery will screen *Episode III*, filmed in Congo. Before Martens' talk on Tuesday, it will show *Episode I*, which was shot in Chechnya.

For *Episode III*, Martens spent almost two years in Congo, both documenting the daily lives of impoverished Congolese and exploring the relationship that those at the lowest end of society had with the upper-level machinations of what we might in the broadest sense call foreign aid: the various national and international committee working groups that funnel money into the country ostensibly to help the poor, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that typically administer it.

Martens takes an intentionally simplistic approach to what we in the West continually shrug off as a complex problem. Just to grab a single example among many, he asks villagers how much money each makes in a month — about \$1, they tell him — and then reveals that the typical NGO worker who parachutes into the village, for a month or so here and there, lives on a \$1,000 monthly allowance.

While this could easily smack of simple pedantics, Martens inflects *Enjoy Poverty* with an absurdist's sardonic glee.

He shows up at a meeting of World Bank governors where it's announced the latest international commitment to foreign aid for the Congo will be \$1.8 billion, and asks some simple questions: How much of Congo's total revenue does the \$1.8 billion represent and if it's significant, is it right to suggest that poverty is an important natural resource for the country, in terms of

VISUAL ARTS

A stark message in blue and pink

Dutch artist Renzo Martens takes aim at foreign aid and poverty in his provocative film shot during almost two years in Congo



RENZO MARTENS

A still from Renzo Martens' film *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*, a gonzo critical take on foreign aid in the Congo.

attracting foreign investment?

One of the governors laughingly calls poverty "a defeat" for the entire international community, before he allows that foreign aid brings more money into the country than any of Congo's main resources — copper, diamonds and

coltan — combined.

This is, in essence, the bombastic core of Martens' exploration: that poverty is in fact a huge revenue stream to be exploited. Martens wants to see the Congolese get in on the action, though here's where that artistic hyperbole comes in again.

Among his revenue-share schemes is his suggestion that wedding photographers turn lens to international-media images of starving children and flecked bodies dispatched by hazard, camo-clad militia — kind that are bread and butt

many news agencies — to make more money. "We should train them to become the beneficiaries of their own poverty," Martens said in a TV interview recently.

As a functional critique of what we typically call "poverty porn" — those endless, dislocated images of ravaged elsewhere that flash on our screens just long enough to register as troubling before being forgotten — Martens' work is brilliantly realized.

When he unapologetically films white aid workers on emergency relief efforts, gleefully snapping photos and videotaping the suffering that surrounds them, the sense is of a Disneyland of third-world misery; as they grin broadly, this is the happiest place on Earth, for them at least.

This is, in essence, the bombastic core of Martens' exploration: that poverty is in fact a huge revenue stream to be exploited

But it's just a prelude to Martens' point, eventually laid out in can't-miss fashion. Martens holds a party for a village he's spent time in, first fashioning an enormous neon sign in bright blue block letters: ENJOY POVERTY (smaller and bright pink is the word "PLEASE").

It's a tantalizing moment, as Martens fires up the generator and the sign, trussed up on ramshackle bamboo scaffolding, comes to life. Dark faces cast in the pale-blue glow light up in broad smiles, giving way to a chorus of cheering, dancing, drumming. He explains earlier to some villagers that the sign is in English, not the native Congolese French, pointing out that "for the audience, it needs to be in English." The villagers nod. In other words, they're not the ones for whom poverty is to enjoy. By bald-faced declaration and a sudden rush of self-implication, Martens makes it crystal clear: if you can read this, he's talking to you.

Episode III: Enjoy Poverty screens Monday, Jan. 9, at 6 p.m. at the University of Toronto's Hart House. *Episode I* screens Tuesday, Jan. 10, at 6 p.m. at Hart House, followed by a talk by Martens at 7 p.m.