

Manufactured Landscapes

“Manufactured Landscapes” is a documentary both artful and provocative. Filmmaker Jennifer Baichwal principally uses stunning photos of Chinese industrial sites taken by Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky and expands them into filmic essays on our world’s industrialism and what we are doing to ourselves as societies.

Sequences of massive assembly plants, of computers being scavenged, of construction work on the gigantic Three Gorges Dam, and of the exploding cityscape of Shanghai are mesmerizing, showing a China we are only now beginning to grasp. Additionally, one section showing the breaking down of tanker ships on a Bangladesh beach is a modern vision of Dante’s Inferno.

The opening tracking shot—a long wordless glide past what seems like acres of assembly tables in one Chinese plant—is simply stunning, an eight-minute pan providing a marvelous set-up for the images that are to come. That amazing opening tracking shot was taken in the Cankun assembly factory in Fujian Province, where 23,000 people work under one roof. Its nickname, quite appropriately, is “The Factory of the World.” We learn that is probably where our steam irons come from.

Canadian Edward Burtynsky, whose photographs inspired this documentary, has been shooting landscapes of industrial life since the 1980’s. He shoots in a large format camera then typically prints his photos at 4 X 5 feet, the forceful prints showing particular attention to granular detail. While he realizes that his unstinting pictures suggest a critique of modern society in environmental terms, he insists he does not want viewers to take away a “singular meaning” from his work. Director Baichwal, a prize-winning director in Canada, agrees, saying that the photos allow one to do a “double take,” permitting a kind of “aesthetic seduction,” where the beauty and wonder of the images strike you first then pull you into the details of the photo itself to contemplate its subject matter.

Baichwal has described her work on “Manufactured Landscapes” as trying to “enter into the photos.” Along with her cinematographer Peter Mettler) she often shows Burtynsky’s full image of a subject then either zooms in (or out) or slow pans to pick out a human or environmental detail. She eschews narration to have the photography speak for itself, and instead uses the occasional interview, along with one sequence of Burtynsky himself at a talk.

This is a wondrous and unsettling vision of our contemporary world and a film unlike any other.

(The film runs 86 minutes and is unrated, though there is nothing objectionable.)

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