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Photography as a socially influential medium in Jennifer Baichwal's

Manufactured Landscapes

“And through my photographs, I'm hoping to be able to engage the audiences of my work, and to come up to it and not immediately be rejected by the image. Not to say, ‘Oh my God, what is it?’ but to be challenged by it -- to say, ‘Wow, this is beautiful’ ” (00:04:25 – 00:02:35, My wish: Manufactured Landscapes and green education). In her feature-length documentary film, Baichwal shows us how landscapes can be the reflections of to what type of society it belongs to. By involving photography and visual observation, Baichwal attempts to make the viewers distinguish good and bad, right and wrong, true and false by themselves. Yet, it is important to acknowledge that their goal is not to pass judgment on what is happening in the world but to visually communicate to the general public the world that we human beings are creating and for each of us to decide the pros and/or cons of this new world. The film discusses the harsh realities of mass industrialization and the lack of green education. It is sort of travelogue through industrialized Asia. Burtynsky's primary foci include the immense amounts of industrial waste and the ways to protect the environment from the overwhelming growth of industrial



Figure 1

markets amongst which are green education, spreading pro-environmental messages, and pollution reduction.

It should also be noted that although the film's founding blocks are the photographs taken in China, the film is designed to educate western countries and societies in order to prevent such events from occurring ever again. One of the main issues in the film is the lack of green education. Baichwal sees it absolutely vital and compulsory for everyone to have a strong sense of how important nature and its preservation is. Uneducated behavior leads to disastrous consequences which should not be left without realization. In the photo above, we see a woman smiling while arranging crushed lithium-ion batteries in metal cans (*Figure 1*). This is the reality within which the population of the lower hierarchical order lives in China. They usually work for huge industrial firms which are oriented on recycling technological waste neglecting the fact that the process of recycling produces countless amounts of toxic fumes and chemicals which absolutely devastate surrounding areas. Thus, education comes as one of the most important aspects of this issue. As Burtynsky himself says, green education is the key to solving such societal problems. As a Canadian himself, Burtynsky found it vital to inform western societies about possible aftermaths of industrialization and avoid environmental catastrophes. Yet again, the education in this movie is not viewed as didacticism, but rather as an objective, visually proven, truth where even words are redundant.

In the film, photographs are taking the place of actors, they are the ones to make an impact. Burtynsky believed that visual story-telling would have a great impact on people, "by not saying what you should see, let me allow them to see their world a little differently." But are they persuasive enough? Do they convince people to stop damaging the environment? I believe that in order to thoroughly explore the film, we must explore the photographs, their ability to

persuade, and the metaphorical meanings they have. I want to discuss the photographs and their importance as well as the behind the scenes work which made it possible to achieve such results. It is also important to know how cinematic effects contribute to the educational goal of the film since the film presents them extensively. For that reason, I also want to analyze accompanying special effects and investigate the relationships between them. Besides, I want to discuss the final results and the scale of the influence of the movie that is how it delivered its messages and what were the outcomes.

FEELINGS AND AESTHETICS

Photographs presented in the movie are not just a bunch of photos put in a slideshow. They are far more complex than that. Burtynsky described them as the series of layered meanings. Photographs are full of aesthetics which induce empty feelings. These images are meant as metaphors to the dilemma of our modern existence. They search for a dialogue between attraction and repulsion. They help people understand things that are impossible to explain in words. Photographs bring emotions filled with void and devastation. It is virtually impossible for our eyes to deny the reality in front of them and the reality is empty horizon filled with recycled materials and rusty metals of innumerable quantities (*Figure 2*).



Figure 2

Novelist Nadia Bozak says, “Because Burtynsky systematically aestheticizes industrial civilization’s environmental incursions, his images are marked with an almost

insentient detachment and lack of critical positioning that can be troubling. But, as Baichwal explained to me, what she finds provocative in Burtynsky's work is this very same ambiguity and lack of didacticism, which leads to the experiential "horror" of encountering the 'detritus of our existence' in what initially appears to be an abstract painting" (Bozak 68). Bozak sees the photographs as the tellers of truth. They are simple, have no critical positioning, and display whatever's happening. I believe that this is one of the reasons people find the photographs so convincing. The idea is that people tend to like things that are simple and easy to understand. On the other hand, Baichwal seems to imply that this aspect of the film is provocative meaning that it was intended by Burtynsky to be so. He depicts people as abstract figures which makes the viewer feel the dehumanization induced by industrialization. Such a beautiful blend of two absolutely different ideas creates an atmosphere filled with emptiness and makes the viewer travel through it. On the one hand, simplicity showing the truth and on the other, an emphasis on dehumanization showing the consequences and the "nature of the truth". Photographs are uniform and repetitive. Most of them depict the "void" caused by the active process of industrialization. One might even find them disturbing. Because Burtynsky only peripherally involves humans, his work has the post-human feel as if all the humans died because of environmental catastrophe. We are left with the world dominated by hulking inorganic commodities.

One of the ways Baichwal achieves aesthetic voice is involving high resolution photographs. Photographs are taken in such high-resolution that they immediately draw viewers' attention. Burtynsky is renown around the world for his large-scale photographing techniques. Professor of communication, culture, information, and technology Ann Donar writes, "there are moments of this awe-inspiring experience, which is at the same time sensory, emotional, and

psychological. Burtynsky's images are shot in such an overwhelmingly large scale and in such visible detail that an overwhelming impact is inevitably felt" (Donar 63). Indeed, photographs are so large that it is almost inevitable for the viewer to plunge into them. Burtynsky makes us feel the empty and destroyed atmosphere and psychological pressure induced by it. In addition to the high-resolution photographs, color, contrast, and saturation of the images are adjusted with only one main purpose, convincing the audience. Huge dams, uniform flat horizons which seem to be endless, and lack of natural sunlight, with such photographing techniques, he convinces us of harsh realities so many fail to realize. One might also note that there is no vegetation. With such visually appealing photographs, Burtynsky makes a strong argument that following an anti-environmental path could lead to the terrifying and irreversible subsequences.

In addition to high resolution photographs, sound effects are playing the key role in setting up the scenes. The soundtrack is composed of various buzzing and other rhythmic mechanical sounds coming from different machines. It is the signification of industrialization. Sometimes these sounds can be overly loud, especially in the beginning, when we are introduced to the industrial factory in China. Associate professor of film studies, filmmaker, and author, Gerda Cammaer says,

"The sound climaxes and the factory images become more pressing. On a black wipe that is half natural (because the tracking camera glides behind a big dark obstacle) and half constructed in post-production, the moving image of the factory becomes a photo diptych of this same factory photographed by Burtynsky. After a bell has announced a break for the factory workers, the moving camera records people leaving the factory, this time from a similar high angle as the one Burtynsky chose for his diptych. Then it pans with a closer frame over the empty workstations.

The camera pauses on a man who stayed behind and is asleep on his table: a subtle comment on the repetitiveness and dullness of this work.” (Cammaer 124).

A single photograph could never capture the extreme scale of that factory, while also letting the viewer experience the sounds, energy, bustle, and personality of the people as they work. This is where the sound comes in handy in *Manufactured Landscapes*. Photographs and sound are complementary in this film. Photographs convey what cannot be put into words and sounds convey what cannot be shown by photographs. In this particular case, Baichwal used sound to emphasize dull and repetitive nature of the work in the factory.

The introduction that is the first ten minutes of the movie is also fascinating. There are virtually no sound effects in this part which makes it shockingly natural. It is a ten-minute tracking shot moving along a factory floor of a huge plant in China employing 23,000 people. Everyone is silent and at the same time everyone makes noise, the noise of hard work. The camera moves past assembly line after assembly line for what seems like forever until we finally see Burtynkys’s photograph of the factory from a high viewpoint, stretching into the blurry distance. Such setting creates the feeling of an infinite loop which seems like a signification of the mundane work or tasks. It is noteworthy that colors in this scene are also limited. Almost all the workers are dressed in yellow which is most likely the part of the company’s dress code yet, as for a viewer, it again creates the dull and



Figure 3

continuous atmosphere filled with emptiness. By manipulating sounds, Baichwal made the viewer more engaged and plunged in into the scenes and accordingly, the reality. It is really the perfect balance and synergy that keeps the viewer interested and convinced of what's happening in industrialized China. Introduction like this was essential to deal with such a challenging task of educating the western societies about the work ethics and attitude of workers of the country known for being one of the largest polluters in the world. And again, the idea of making the viewers judges is still important in this scene as we do not see any subjective opinions or claims from neither Baichwal nor Burtynsky.

Albeit the film is very convincing, it is lackluster in terms of positive messages. This is the part where I believe that the film failed. There are almost no scenes which show what would the life be in the greener world as opposing to the world of industrial manufacturing. One might say that plunging into total industrial manufacturing is better than pursuing the green path since there is simply no evidence that green world is better. Every aspect of life seems to be non-present including even a basic communication. People are not willing to socialize. Humans are depicted as almost fully automated machines which are “programmed” to have only one mission: recycling and manufacturing products. Every day, they gather in front of factories to produce more and make fewer errors. Workers perform same repetitive tasks over and over again, manufacturing circuit breakers and/or testing sprays for irons. Brief interviews with those workers are really eye-opening, revealing the years they worked in the same place. The film has absolutely no humor which is normal for a documentary like this, however, the amount of negativity with no positivity at all turns the film into the dull and monotonous collection of disturbing images. We are watching the post-apocalyptic world which has no pity for humans. Even a slight positivity would please the viewer after this much negativity yet, the film-makers

decided not to include it which made the movie the source of disturbance and anxiety. Although the film appears to be very convincing for the viewer, it is very hard to fully watch. Because of this much negativity, there have also been some negative receptions. Prairie Miller of WBAI Web Radio wrote, “There’s a huge difference between conveying the numbing, dehumanizing and mindlessly repetitive nature of factory drudgery in a movie, and subjecting your audience to the same by involving them visually in that unbearable tedium.” (Miller, Comment on “Manufactured Landscapes”). At some point, it feels like the movie does not promote technological advancement and is in all aspects, against it. Throughout the film, we do not see solutions where technology is also involved. Yet, if the film is against technology, there are no strong arguments supporting the claim. Obviously, the film’s primary purpose is education and spreading information on how to prevent such environmental disasters, but it fails to find solutions and answer questions which are emerged from the film itself.

BEHIND THE SCENES IN THE FILM ITSELF?



Figure 4

As opposed to the last section, in this section, I want to discuss the ways and techniques that were used to create the movie. Perhaps the most interesting part in *Manufactured*

Landscapes is seeing behind the scenes right in the film. Baichwal let the viewer see how the building bricks of the film, photographs, were taken. But she did not stop on that. She also included conversations, negotiations, and all the politics which were eventually needed in order to take photos and thus, make the film complete (*Figure 4*). Throughout the film, the viewer follows the steps of the photographer experiencing every little detail. Seeing photographer like Burtynsky showing how it's really done is absolutely fascinating. The part where Burtynsky visits a town dedicated to the E-waste recycling is especially engaging. We are able to witness the reality through his eyes and camera. The simple structure of these scenes makes it very easy to understand what's happening. This was a very intelligent move by Baichwal since by including behind the scenes in the film, she also bolstered the argument of "reality". She gave us sort of proof that everything they captured is real. It tells us that they were actually physically present at those locations and took all the pictures by themselves. In his article, Jordan M. Smith writes, "Following no real narrative to speak of, this basic structure allows us to see the situations in which many of the artist's work took place while showing off the final products" (Smith, "Manufactured Landscapes | Blue-ray Review"). Careful alignment of photographs turns the static images of Burtynsky into a live performance as if the viewer was watching the video.

It is remarkable that the film also includes interviews with local Chinese workers. Yet those interviews do not specifically promote environment or make very specific claims. Because the film included minimal commentary, audiences were allowed to develop their individual views and opinions regarding the topic. Baichwal's own chosen position of objectivity, leaving the viewer the freedom of his/her own interpretation. These workers provide valuable information to the viewer concerning what's really like to work in China's industrial factories. It appeared that Chinese factories were undergoing the process of development and expansion at a

very rapid rate. Accordingly, the environmental damage was increasing proportionally. Viewer can hear all this information in the form of a live interview. In regard to interviews, however, the voices from the high-ranked government officials were missing which could have been the ultimate fulfillment for the film. Their opinions are of an utmost importance and might have influenced a lot of people through the movie including western societies. Taking into account the fact that given evidences of large-scale pollution, no government officials would talk anti-environmentally during the interview as it would simply put a huge stain on their reputation. Thus, knowing the importance of the preservation of nature, these people would effectively deliver pro-environmental messages across the globe. Yet, realizing the fact that such interviews would be nearly impossible to get, especially in China, the film does present wide variety of interviews which helps us to look at environmental issues from the Chinese peoples' perspective.

OUTCOMES AND INFLUENCES

Being called “an extraordinarily haunting, beautiful, insightful, touching, and thought-provoking movie” by Al Gore at Nashville Film Festival, the film has a long list of achievements. To start with, the film has received numerous national and international film festival nominations including awards from *Toronto Film Critics Association*, *Toronto International Film Festival*, *Calgary Film Festival*, *Atlantic Film Festival* etc. Most importantly, the three wishes of Burtynsky: building pro-green website, making an Imax Film, and encourage people to discuss sustainable living have been all successfully come to reality. One of his wishes: building a website to promote green thinking has been realized shortly. Thanks to WGBH and the TED community, the show and site *Meet the Greens* debuted at TED2007. His second wish: making an Imax film, morphed into the breathtaking film *Manufactured Landscapes*. At last, the

third wish, wider in scope, was simply to encourage "a massive and productive worldwide conversation about sustainable living" which came to reality with the help of TED community and the site WorldChanging.com has been launched and is successfully operating thereafter.

Yet, there is a lot to do. Although the film did make a big impact in terms of spreading the pro-environmental message, America's coal production rates are virtually the same not to mention that of China. According to CEIC coal production rate in China has shown tremendous increase: indexed 1685.71 as of 2016 and peaking in 2013 with the index of 1894.59. In Canada, however, the current index is low: totaling 31.41 yet peaking in 2013 with the index of 36.44. Regarding electronic waste, a new study by government agency "Statistics Canada" reveals that it has nearly tripled in last five years. The film has shown the world a dreadful scenario which can come true if not paying attention to negative effects toward environment, but the data shows that despite such efforts, governments and private companies still do not care much about environmental issues. What should the next step be? Is there a medium through which our voice is powerful enough to convince such parties? *Manufactured Landscapes*, as magnificent as it is, did educate western societies, which is conspicuously seen from its public exposure, media reports, and reviews, however, on the global scale, the changes are still to be made.

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