



Manufactured Landscapes Discussion Guide

Director: Jennifer Baichwal

Year: 2006

Time: 86 min

You might know this director from:

Watermark (2013)

Payback (2012)

Act of God (2009)

Let It Come Down: The Life of Paul Bowles (1998)

FILM SUMMARY

MANUFACTURED LANDSCAPES is a visually mesmerizing documentary that is part artist portrait, part social documentary. The film focuses on the work of Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky whose has created a new form of landscape photography, one that explores the intricate link between industry and nature, combining aspects of mining, quarrying, shipping, oil production and recycling into eloquent, highly expressive visions that are both beautiful and same deeply unsettling. The majority of the photographs were taken during a 2005 trip to China to document the rapid scale of industrialization and its impact on landscapes that have been altered by large-scale human activity.

With breathtaking sequences, such as the opening tracking shot through an almost endless factory, the filmmakers also extend the narratives of Burtynsky's photographs, allowing us to meditate on our impact on the planet and witness both the epicenters of industrial endeavor and the dumping grounds of its waste. We also visit a factor that is 1 kilometer in length and employs 23,000 workers who produce many of the appliances which western society has come to rely on.

Not your typical environmental film, MANUFACTURED LANDSCAPES challenges the viewer to question the ecological and social impact of mass production and mass consumption in which we all take part while it makes no moral judgments and offers simple solutions.

FILM THEMES

Modern-day technological advancements are widening the middle class around the globe. More people are enjoying the benefits of consumerism, but this creates an ever-growing demand for energy and natural resources and takes an enormous toll on the environment.

ART AS A CATALYST

In rethinking the idea of “landscape,” Edward Burtynsky presents a rather neutral view of ecological disasters as high art. In making this choice, Burtynsky uses his art to draw the viewer into a dialogue about the way we live now, rather than presenting the plethora of disturbing images in order to make a hard-hitting statement about climate change and industrialization. Since politics are often polarizing, eschewing a particular stance allowed Burtynsky to engage with more people who could neither agree or disagree with him. This choice raises interesting questions about the power of art as a catalyst for social change and about the way in which artists can most effectively impact audiences.

MODERNIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

The massive Three Gorges Dam is considered an engineering marvel. The world’s largest hydropower project, it set records for the number of people who were displaced (more than 1.2 million), the number of cities and towns flooded (13 cities, 140 towns, 1,350 villages), and the size of the reservoir (more than 600 kilometers long). It was expected to supply 10% of China’s total electrical power but demand has grown so rapidly that it supplies less than 2%. The Three Gorges Dam serves as a metaphor for the film in that it embodies the wonders of modern industrial feats along with all of the costs that come with them.

THE ARCHEOLOGY OF CONSUMERISM

The “landscapes” photographed by Edward Burtynsky reflect our impact upon nature and the many ways in which we’ve reshaped the landscape. From landfills of discarded electronics and mountains of abandoned tires, to steel carcasses of decommissioned ships, these are not the images that typically come to mind when one thinks of landscapes. And yet, these images remind us of our role in the life cycle of modern mass production. Burtynsky’s images do not validate the “out of sight, out of mind” attitude we often take when it comes to our trash.

CIVILIZATION AT A CROSSROADS

The rising prosperity of countries like China are striving to provide a “better life” for its citizens. In the west, people have enjoyed high standards of living and an ever-flowing stream of cheap consumer goods, but those in the developing world are just attaining the means to enjoy and expect consumer-driven prosperity. As the global middle class grows, the toll on the environment rapidly increases, while solutions become even more complex and difficult to envision.

“We are drawn by desire - a chance at good living, yet we are consciously or unconsciously aware that the world is suffering for our success. Our dependence on nature to provide the materials for our consumption and our concern for the health of our planet sets us into an uneasy contradiction. These images function as reflecting pools of our times.”

Edward Burtynsky

FILM FACTS:

- In 2007, China surpassed the U.S. as the world's leading emitter of carbon dioxide. However, the U.S. still has a vast lead in carbon dioxide emissions per person. Carbon dioxide is the primary greenhouse gas emitted through human activities and is a major cause of global warming.
- The estimated cost of environmental degradation in China (from pollution and industrialization) was approximately \$230 billion in 2010 — three times more than in 2004.
- The World Coal Association estimates that there are more than 2,300 coal power plants around the globe, including approximately 620 in China and 600 in the U.S.
- Everyday on their Twitter feed, the U.S. Embassy in Beijing reports the Air Quality Index, which is based on standards set by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).
- 1.2 million people were displaced in order to build the Three Gorges Dam in China. The Chinese government has begun an urbanization effort to resettle 2.4 million farmers from mountain areas in the central Chinese province of Shaanxi over the next ten years. This will be the largest peacetime population transfer in history.
- Hydroelectricity is electricity produced by hydropower. China, Canada and Brazil are the world's largest hydroelectric producers, respectively.
- The number of "traditional villages" in China has plummeted from 3.6 million in 2000 to 2.7 million in 2010. A national survey in 2012 showed the vast majority of traditional villages disappearing into China's urbanization vortex, which has forced tens of millions to the cities.
- Jennifer Baichwal's first documentary was a portrait of reclusive writer Paul Bowles (*Let it Come Down: The Life of Paul Bowles*, 1998).
- Jennifer Baichwal, Nick de Pencier, and photographer Edward Burtynsky reunited to collaborate on the 2013 documentary, *WATERMARK*. The film ties together diverse stories from around the globe about our relationship with water.
- Edward Burtynsky's photographs of global industrial landscapes are included in over 50 major museum collections around the world, including the National Gallery of Canada, Museum of Modern Art, Guggenheim Museum, Reina Sofia Museum, Madrid, and Los Angeles County Museum of Art in California.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Give others a chance to experience and consider these powerful images.
2. Learn more about the cycles of consumerism and how you can reduce your own consumerism. Participate in [Buy Nothing Day](#).
3. Reduce your carbon footprint and your contribution to global warming. Use public transportation or ride a bike. Choose a laptop over a desktop. Choose energy-efficient appliances. Try to repair your appliances, clothes, shoes, and electronics instead of throwing them away and buying new ones. Filter your own water rather than buying plastic bottled water. Adjust your thermostats to use 15% less energy. Buy local food.
4. Follow Edward Burtynsky's work and check out his collaboration with director Jennifer Baichwal in the 2013 documentary, *WATERMARK*, which is focused on water – how it shapes us and how we're affecting it.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.