

London Dispatch

A response to Yasmine Kabir's film "The Last Rites"

By the London critic Alisa Lebow

How can we characterize an aesthetics of hell and how can we distinguish it from other forms of aestheticization? This question came to me while watching the short film *The Last Rites* (Yasmine Kabir, Bangladesh, 2008). It is a 17 minute film about the infamous ship breaking yards in Chittagong Bangladesh, the subject several other films that I've seen over the past few years. In all of the other representations of the yard, the filmmakers seem utterly smitten with the irresistibly photogenic site, the huge hulking tankers, half in, half out of the water, dwarfing the ragtag army of workers who will dismantle the ships practically with their bare hands. The breathtakingly beautiful barefoot Bangladeshis heave steel rope over their naked shoulders singing rhythmic work songs against the silhouette of the sun, as the mammoth ships stare back impassively in their statuesque state of decay. This is the visual poetry of the place, conveyed by the likes of photographer Edward Burtynsky in the film *Manufactured Landscapes* (Jennifer Baichwal, Canada, 2006), which can also be described as obscene. Reviewers wax lyrical: 'beautiful in its depiction of ugliness,' 'a magisterial tour of the world's most devastating and devastated industrial zones'. The attentive reader of this column will remember that I excoriated this film several months back, precisely for its privileging aesthetics over politics.

More recently I saw another impressively beautiful film depicting Chittagong and felt similarly. *Iron Crows* (Bong-Nam Park, South Korea, 2009) delves more deeply into the lives of the workers and gives a better sense of the working conditions than *Manufactured Landscapes*, but it too seems to get lost in the sheer magnitude of the scale, the broken ships serving as too irresistible a metaphor for late capitalism, to really focus on the hell of the place. It really is magnificent.

These films and others sent me into a spin, fretting that aestheticization per se was the problem in representing, well, hell. Beautification makes such scenes not only attractive, but somehow inevitable, naturalizing their place on this planet as if they rightfully belonged and could be justified, precisely on aesthetic grounds. I had begun to despair, wondering if the cranky anti-aesthetes of the 1970s and 80s really did have a point, and that if aesthetics were to ever have an oppositional rather than affirmative politics, they could at best be an aesthetics of garbage—a term used in Latin America in the 1970s to denote an unadorned depiction of poverty and destitution, while recycling the detritus of life into art. Yet, in this new shiny century of surface as depth, images of poverty and recycling end up being the sign of high art, with films like *Wasteland* (Lucy Walker, US, 2010) making heroes out of top grossing artists like Vik Muniz as he dares to dirty his hands working with garbage recyclers in Brazil. So much for the politics of the aesthetics of garbage.

Luckily, I was able to see Kabir's short film that while aesthetically as complex and accomplished as any mentioned above, manages to convey the visceral truth of Chittagong—it is a hell on earth; a labor camp no less cruel than Buchenwald or Dachau. With her images, one feels the impossible weight of the ropes, as shoeless feet are submerged ankle deep in toxic petroleum; the palpable hunger driving bodies of skin and bone to repeat arduous physical feats that would make a strong man groan. The film brought me straight back to *Night and Fog* (Alain Resnais, France, 1955) to remind me that aesthetics per se are not the problem, it is merely the ideological purposes which aesthetics are made to serve that must be questioned. I am grateful for Kabir's film for reminding me of this fact.