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Movie Review | 'Iron Crows'

Documentary on Shipbreakers, and Where Tankers Go When They Die

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The huge container ships and tankers that cross the world's oceans are crucial to the functioning of the global consumer economy, and yet they are also curiously marginal to our perception of the world. Many of us take for granted the goods they transport, and perhaps we think about how those goods reached us only when we fly over a major port city and catch sight of maritime giants docked under the cranes in the harbor.

Where do those ships go when they have outlasted their usefulness? That strange, fascinating question is at the heart of "Iron Crows," a startlingly beautiful documentary by Bong-Nam Park that is also devastatingly sad. Mr. Park, a South Korean filmmaker armed with a high-definition digital camera, a knack for striking visual compositions and a deep reservoir of human sympathy, spent months with a group of shipbreakers in Chittagong, a city in Bangladesh where many of the world's largest vessels are taken apart, their fixtures sold off and their bodies cut into scrap metal.

The workers, men and teenagers from impoverished rural villages, wade across tidal mudflats toward the grounded ships and painstakingly dismantle them with blowtorches, grappling hooks, winches and hammers. The work is dangerous, and the pay is low, but the shipbreakers display a kind of stoical, weather-beaten camaraderie that will be familiar to fans of reality shows about tough guys doing hazardous jobs.

Though they take pride in their labor and the grit it requires — and though the company they work for is reputed to have good working conditions, compared with some of its local competitors — these men endure deprivations that will be shocking to some Western viewers. They live in cramped dormitories and are paid subsistence wages, risking their lives with little prospect of advancement. One man has been unable, in more than a decade, to save the \$700 he thinks he would need to start a small business in his hometown. Another who has worked in the shipbreaking yard for 32 of his 48 years can barely afford to feed his family.

And yet, for him and his comrades, this life seems like an improvement over the intractable poverty of the countryside. Mr. Park follows one of them, a sweet, sensitive young man named Belal, home to visit his family, including a wife and an infant daughter who is blind as a result of poor nutrition. Belal's sorrow is hard to watch, and his insistence on remaining hopeful in spite of everything is heartbreaking.

Though it creates a powerful picture of exploitation and inequality, "Iron Crows" is less a piece of advocacy than an unsettling hybrid of art and witness. Like the work

of the photographer Edward Burtynsky — whose haunting images of industrial sites are the subject of Jennifer Baichwal's 2006 documentary, "Manufactured Landscapes" — Mr. Park's film is the vivid record of a complex reality. The way it turns blunt, material facts into sublime images is both astonishing and troubling.