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MOVIE REVIEW

Awash in Capitalism, a Changing Earth

By A. O. SCOTT

In “The Enchafèd Flood,” his resonant study of “the romantic iconography of the sea,” W. H. Auden noted that, in the opening verses of the Book of Genesis, the vast watery expanses of the world served as a “symbol for the primordial undifferentiated flux, the substance that became created nature only by having form imposed upon or wedded to it.”

“[The Forgotten Space](#),” an engrossing and provocative essay film by Noël Burch and Allan Sekula, approaches the sea from the opposite direction. Neither as chaotic nor as romantic as it may have appeared to our ancestors or to Auden, the modern sea of this documentary has come fully under the sway of global capitalism.

Maritime trade is almost as old as humanity itself, of course, but Mr. Burch, a film critic, and Mr. Sekula, a historian and photographer, are concerned with its present manifestations. “The Forgotten Space” offers a more politically inclined, less dashing exploration of some of the territory navigated by the journalist William Langewiesche in his amazing 2006 book, “[The Outlaw Sea](#).”

The filmmakers are especially interested in the impact of shipping containers — those brightly colored, corrugated metal boxes that have changed the way goods are transported around the world — on land. The consequences of containerization reach into every aspect of modern life and, in Mr. Burch and Mr. Sekula’s view, are almost never benign.

A visit to Rotterdam in the Netherlands discovers an impressively automated port with a diminished work force, most of whose members labor in isolation in front of screens rather than wrangle cargo with hands and hooks. Containers are lifted by cranes onto barges, railroad cars and trucks to be hauled inland, and every phase of their journey seems to involve the exploitation of labor and the degradation of the environment.

Small farms in the Dutch countryside have been chopped up to make way for a new publicly financed, privately managed freight line. In Southern California drivers find their standards of living eroded, now that they are independent contractors rather than unionized workers. The Indonesian and Filipino crews on board the giant container ships, and the workers in the Chinese factories that fill them, come from a vast pool of the poor and the displaced, willing to work long hours in harsh conditions for a chance to buy into the consumer economy they serve.

“The Forgotten Space” is unabashedly polemical and rigorously pessimistic, a sustained Marxian indictment of 21st-century capital. The narration, by Mr. Sekula, is at times lyrical and rarely subtle, but the film is most graceful and moving when its argument slows down or wanders into

an interesting tangent.

At other points, like an extended rhetorical attack on the [Guggenheim](#) museum in Bilbao, Spain, the filmmakers seem to be riding an ideological hobby horse down a dead-end street. But they have a good visual instinct for the sublimity, as well as the ugliness, of the industrial and postindustrial environments, and a patient and generous interest in what people have to say about their own lives.

Various experts offer informative analysis, but the testimony of seamen, factory workers and residents of a California homeless encampment is at the heart of the film's guiding ethical and aesthetic principles, which have to do with the defense of human dignity in the face of a system that so often appears hostile or indifferent to it.

The Forgotten Space

Opens on Wednesday in Manhattan.

Written and directed by Allan Sekula and Noël Burch; narrated by Mr. Sekula; directors of photography, Attila Boa and Wolfgang Thaler; edited by Menno Boerema; music by Riccardo Tesi and Louis Andriessen; produced by Frank van Reemst and Joost Verheij; released by Doc.Eye Film. In English, Dutch, Spanish, Korean, Bahasa Indonesia and Mandarin. At the Anthology Film Archives, 32 Second Avenue, at Second Street, East Village. Running time: 1 hour 52 minutes. This film is not rated.