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Suspended Moments of the Mundane Routine: Testing the Possibilities of Slow Cinema in Sharon Lockhart's *Lunch Break* (2008) and *Podwórka* (2009)

In this article, I analyze various ways in which Sharon Lockhart's experimental films, *Lunch Break* (2008) and *Podwórka* (2009), develop the concept of an industrial landscape and local community by simultaneously incorporating and challenging narrative and visual conventions traditionally associated with the poetics of slow cinema. Focusing mostly on the realities of urban life, Lockhart's unscripted and intimate portraits of American and Polish localities resonate with a highly meditative approach as well as blend rigorous film aesthetics with an anthropological and ethnographic sensibility to community engagement. Although the filmmaker's legacy has been predominantly classified, akin to Peter Hutton's or James Benning's works, as representing slow cinema (see e.g. MacDonald, *Avant-doc…* 2; MacDonald, "Panorama" 636), it seems to have taken some of its formal traits to their extreme through juxtaposing stillness and movement of the imagery with "filmic time, subjective time, and real time in mediations on ritual, landscape, and labour" (Kuhn and Westwell 381). To achieve the desired effect, Lockhart experiments and expands on the genre's typical devices such as: an extended shot duration, fixed camera position, minimalism and austerity or anti-narrative by the use of vertical planes, Z-axis, a single tracking shot slowed down to three frames per second, extremely long takes, atypical camera angles or a detached perspective.

Key words: American experimental film and video, Sharon Lockhart, slow cinema, anthropological film practice, sublime, technological sublime

Introduction

In the realm of contemporary motion pictures and still photography, the work of Sharon Lockhart continues the tradition of the formalist-conceptualist trends in avant-garde and experimental cinema, most notably influenced by Morgan Fisher's and James Benning's filmmaking style. Born in Norwood, Massachusetts in 1964 and coming from a working class background, Lockhart rose to international prominence in her thirties with the 1995 photographic series *Auditions*, which re-enacted the first kiss scene from Francois Truffaut's coming-of-age film *Small Change* and initiated the artist's lifelong interest in depicting children as the subjects of her works. Later, Lockhart made her name as an artist preoccupied with ethnographically-oriented cinematic and psychological examinations of the concepts of identity and landscape representation, authentic and spontaneous patterns of human behavior, passing time or an individual and collective consciousness combined with a conceptual analysis of the ontological qualities of the imagery, particularly concerning duration. The presence of these and related themes is echoed in both her early and later series of photographs and films that constitute a "tableaux of space and time, inhabited by nature and people in harmony and discord" where, however, sociological observations give way to the structure and composition of the image, hence merging anthropological and experimental film practice ("Sharon Lockhart MILENA, MILENA"). Similarly, Joan Marter notes that Lockhart's work transcends "the genres of documentary photography and feature film, always retaining a particularly tense, theatrical quality" (176) and such a tendency is indeed evident in her landmark films, *Goshogaoka* (1998), *Teatro Amazonas* (1999), *NŌ* (2003), *Pine Flat* (2006), *Lunch Break* (2008), *Exit* (2008), *Double Tide* (2009) and *Podwórka* (2009), which "empower the often-disregarded voice" of a child (*Goshogaoka*, *Pine Flat*, *Podwórka*) and an industrial worker (*NŌ*, *Lunch Break*, *Exit*, *Double Tide*) ("Publications").

Merging Structuralism, Anthropological Film Practice and Slow Eco-cinema

Scholars like Scott MacDonald (*American Ethnographic Film* 106) or Caterina Pasqualino and Arnd Schneider (2) situate Lockhart's attempts to freeze and sustain a working class culture and environment from "an anthropological perspective of documenting the socially invisible" in the field of visual anthropology, ethnographic film and personal documentary (Nicolacopoulou, "Lunch Break"). More specifically, Pasqualino and Schneider argue that, in line with anthropological film practice exemplified by Juan Downey and Trinh T. Minh-ha, Lockhart's experimental works "problematize closeness and distance to the ethnographic subject and the multiple viewpoints of the participant observer" and fundamentally question "the material processes of visual perception" (2). The latter trend might be also seen as a reincarnation of the 1970s structuralism, which draws on the lack of narration, interrogates the experience of cinematic time and space or engages in ritual and film-performance (Schneider and Pasqualino 2-4). Both P. Adams Sitney and MacDonald note that Lockhart follows the tradition of minimalism and structuralism where "the shape of the whole film is predetermined and simplified, and it is that shape which

is the primal impression of the film" as well as relies on a formal elegance or meticulous and self-reflexive compositional logic, which serve to interrogate visual perception (Sitney 348). MacDonald discusses this relationship further by labeling the filmmaker's works as "contributions to the history of critical cinema – inheritors, in particular, of the formalist-conceptualist tendency instigated during the 1960s and 1970s by such filmmakers as Michael Snow, Yoko Ono, Hollis Frampton, Ernie Gehr, Taka Iimura, J.J. Murphy, Morgan Fisher, and James Benning" (*A Critical Cinema 5* 311). Indeed, Lockhart seems to be under a particularly strong influence of Benning in her attempts to "engage place with a formalist rigor and with considerable wit" as evident in such projects as *Teatro Amazonas* (1999), *Goshogaoka* (1997), *NŌ* (2003) or *Pine Flat* (2006) (MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5* 311).

Following this line of reasoning, MacDonald positions the filmmaker's legacy in a broader context of slow and eco-cinema, both of which encourage the practice of perceptual retraining "meant to model a resistance to the determination of modern corporations to promote hysterical consumption of their products, a tendency that has considerable environmental costs" ("Panorama" 636). Especially Lockhart's *Double Tide* (2010) can be considered exemplary of eco-cinema, originally defined as a tradition of filmmaking that "uses technology to create the illusion of preserving Nature, (…) [and] that provides an evocation of the experience of being immersed in the natural world" (MacDonald, "Towards an Ecocinema" 108). However, while *Double Tide*, akin to Hutton's, Benning's or J.P. Sniadecki's works, offers a "depiction of the natural world within a cinematic experience that models patience and mindfulness – qualities of consciousness crucial for a deep appreciation of and an ongoing commitment to the natural environment", *Lunch Break* and *Podwórka* lack some typical representations of the sublime and luminous landscape, which stem from the Hudson River School's and contemporary American cinema's practices (MacDonald, "The Ecocinema Experience" 19). Instead, both pictures can be seen as a manifestation of the (technological) sublime and perceptual retraining evident in Lockhart's attempts to simultaneously seek inspiration from and manipulate selected slow cinema conventions. In an interview with MacDonald, the artist elaborates on some major differences between working in a natural landscape and in the architectural spaces:

> For me the main difference was the amount of attention that has to be paid to nature when you are working in a landscape. Naturally, I already knew this from my photographic work, but living in a farming community for two months I developed a heightened awareness of all the changes and rhythms that take place in nature. I became aware of the growing and harvesting cycles of different plants, the length of the days, the quality of light at different times of day, and lots of other little things that you don't have to worry about when you are working inside and, especially, with artificial lights. Inside, most things are stable. Outside, there are many more variables, and you are much more dependent on your awareness of them than on your ability to alter them. (…) In other respects, though, the landscape functions much like architecture. It provides a limitation that somehow defines the space of the picture plane (MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 5* 328).

Drawing on the aforementioned statement, one may hypothesize that although *Lunch Break* features the architectural spaces inside the BIW's shipyard and *Podwórka* focuses on the outside urban environment of Łódź's courtyards, both films tend to

share the representation of industrial landscape by simultaneously incorporating and challenging narrative and visual conventions traditionally associated with the poetics of slow cinema. Focusing mostly on the realities of urban life, Lockhart's unscripted and intimate portraits of American and Polish localities resonate with a highly meditative approach as well as blend rigorous film aesthetics with an anthropological and ethnographic sensibility to community engagement.

Lunch Break

Lockhart's *Lunch Break* features a long corridor stretching almost the entire shipyard where forty two workers, including electricians, pipefitters, carpenters, welders and others, are shot having their midday meal and undertaking such activities as: eating, talking, reading or sleeping. The filmmaker's focus seems to be both on the imagery's (non)narrative content and a rather peculiar choice of montage, the former of which centers on the community of workers of Maine's major naval shipbuilding factory, Bath Iron Works (BIW), located on the Kennebec River in Bath. Lockhart's choice of BIW as a subject for the film stems from her personal connections to the state and was only possible due to a successful collaboration with Local 6, one of the trade unions representing the company's workers, that helped her obtain all the permissions necessary to develop the project. As a result, the artist spent approximately one year on the shipyard's premises where she observed and interviewed selected workers during their daily shifts. She became particularly interested in monitoring the brief intervals in their workday schedule, in part to preserve the lunch break as a "social ritual," which is rapidly disappearing from the present day American workplace, and to focus on individual rather than collective stories of the BIW's employees ("Sharon Lockhart Lunch Break" 3). These measures have been taken to continually challenge the perception of their mundane routine and explore the relationship between free and structured time. Interestingly, Lockhart resigns from the use of a fixed camera position, employed frequently in her previous films, and deliberately sets the camera in motion, which potteringly moves down the hallway, lined with rusty lockers, to expand the titular lunchtime into "a sustained gaze" ("Lunch Break, 2008"). As noted by Lockhart, "the hallway seems not only an industrial nexus but also a social one, its surfaces containing a history of self-expression and customization" and hence provides "an extended meditation on a moment of respite from productive labor" ("Lunch Break, 2008").

In terms of montage, the film consists of a single continuous wide-angle frontward tracking shot digitally slowed down to three frames per second in the postproduction process. Originally, the footage lasted ten minutes and was shot on a 35mm camera, that is a total of 14,400 frames, also functioning as still photographs, each of which is displayed for less than a second. The picture was later transferred to a high-definition digital medium and every frame was copied eight times, as a result of which its overall length was prolonged to eighty minutes. Moreover, the visual transition from one sequence of eight frames to another takes the form of a fluid dissolve, which serves to situate the work between photography and film while simultaneously probing the limits of both media in a literal and figurative sense ("Sharon Lockhart Lunch Break" 4). As the footage consists predominantly of vertical planes

and the camera moves along the Z-axis of the frame, it also strains and tricks the spectator's sight and hence affects their perception of space and time. For instance, the use of slow motion gives rise to certain optical illusions depending whether one chooses to concentrate either on the center or edges of the frame, which renders the footage move faster or slower. Specifically, when no humans enter a given frame, the camera appears to be almost motionless and thus a tracking shot begins to resemble a photograph rather than a real space. The imagery is additionally enhanced by both diagetic and nondiagetic sounds, which consist of an electronic score composed in collaboration with Becky Allen and James Benning and is intertwined with industrial noises and human voices. Particularly, the harmonic frequencies of the machine sounds, later complemented by an electronic keyboard composition, remain an integral part of the soundtrack, yet, contrary to the footage, they have been recorded in real time. As stated in the exhibition catalog organized by the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, the contrast between "the perpetual drone of factory sounds" and fainting human voices, which surface only momentarily, build an aura of suspense. Moreover, the discrepancy between "the edited sounds played at normal speed and the intentionally slowed-down motion of the images confuses our sense of time, calling attention to the fact that our perceptions of the workers' reality are mediated by both the objective eye of the camera and the subjective vision of the artist" ("Sharon Lockhart Lunch Break" 4). This increasing sense of ambiguity created by the picture's complexly multilayered and highly evocative score along with the camera's gradual passage through the factory offers "a meditative and melancholic reflection on the architectural, social and phenomenological space of a notably anachronistic mode of industrialized labor" ("Timestage…"). As suggested in the aforementioned catalog, it is, however, the employment of an extremely slow motion that fulfills Lockhart's core idea behind the project, that is to enable the viewer to survey mundane details of the workers' daily routine, which typically escape their attention, as well as to "partake in a unique kind of suspended meditation on this brief interval of free time in their daily work schedule" ("Sharon Lockhart Lunch Break" 4). Meanwhile, SFMOMA places the project in the larger socio-political context by claiming that "Lockhart's work is completely unsentimental yet deeply humane, focused on mundane details yet grounded in a contemporary political and economic reality: the decline of the American industrial working class in the context of 21st-century global capitalism" ("Sharon Lockhart Lunch Break"). Similarly, Maria Nicolacopoulou contends that the featured visual and audio effects reinforce a sense of physical and social distance between the workers and the audience, which might imply some inherent economic divisions within the U.S. society:

> The dark interior of the enclosed screening area creates the illusion of that featured corridor extending its boundaries toward the audience, while the monotonous and overpowering industrial hum of the accompanying audio further heightens the work's immersive quality. The awkward feelings of impatience and unease that surface as a result of the film's manipulated speed physically remind viewers of the uncomfortable distance between their world and the workers. (…) The film demands that viewers take a closer look into the socio-cultural foundations of America's geopolitical economic structure, to a subtle yet disenchanting effect (Nicolacopoulou, "Lunch Break").

Clearly, the aforementioned interpretation is also reflected in Lockhart's use of a fixed camera position. Despite resigning from a dynamic mise-en-scène, favored, for instance, in *Goshogaoka* and *Teatro Amazonas*, *Lunch Break*'s static camera "plays with depth and surface and renders ambiguous the distance between theatrical and natural gesture" in order to juxtapose its "polished, high art aesthetic and formal rigor with a keen and politically astute ethnographic attention to (…) subjects" ("Timestage…").

Podwórka

Meanwhile, Lockhart's 16mm *Podwórka*, often regarded as a miniature 31-minute version of *Pine Flat*, features a group of unsupervised children playing in the meager and crumbling courtyards of Łódź, Poland and presumably inhabiting the surrounding apartment buildings, a ubiquitous element of the city's architecture. Interestingly, the film constitutes a part of the larger body of work developed in Poland and devoted to the study of Polish children and adolescents (especially women), including photographic portraits and video installations like *Untitled Studies* (1993–ongoing), *Milena, Jaroslaw, Poland* (2013, 2014), *Rudzienko* (2014) *Antoine/Milena* (2016) or *Milena, Radawa* (2016). Lockhart's active participation in the Polish art scene for over the last decade has also culminated in the artist's acting as Poland's representative at the 57th Venice Biennale with her most recent project, *Little Review*, curated by Barbara Piwowarska and inspired by Janusz Korczak's *Maly Przeglad* (1926-1939), a supplement for the *Nasz Przeglad* daily newspaper targeted at children and young adults. In this context, *Podwórka* may be seen as a particularly significant work as it led to Lockhart's meeting of her future long-term collaborator on the film's set, the then-nine-year-old Milena Slowinska, and fostered Lockhart's further interest in exploring child psychology among Polish communities. Below Lyra Kilston provides an almost poetic description of the picture's content:

> In a dim, narrow courtyard, a pothole, ringed by pieces of broken concrete, has filled with dark water. The camera lingers on this scene in one unmoving five-minute shot, as two young boys meander around the confined concrete area (…). One of the boys rides his small bicycle up to the pothole and regards it with intent curiosity. He starts an absorbing game of repeatedly dipping the bicycle's wheels into the water and reacts by gleefully clapping his hands and laughing – the dirty puddle, an eyesore and inconvenience to some, is to him a toy and a marvel. (…) Amidst crumbling apartment walls and boarded windows, stray dogs and a flock of pigeons flit across the camera's still gaze, as children invent games with sticks and rocks, play swords, or line up by height to kick a ball against a wall. This is a child's world, where puddles, debris, and factories are imaginatively repurposed for endless uses. In one scene, as children climb around what looks like a shuttered factory, hanging from eaves and scrambling onto rooftops, their movements resemble training for the guerilla gymnastics of parkour (Kilston).

Interestingly, the titular blighted, graffiti-strewn and impromptu playgrounds are portrayed as a rather confined space separated from the streets or "a sanctuary from the traffic and commotion of the city" and hence form a striking contrast to largely overdetermined and safe playgrounds of suburban America ("Podwórka,

2009"). Namely, the Polish courtyards appear to be a more diverse urban environment featuring storage units, metal armatures and parking lots that serve as the children's sandboxes, gyms or soccer fields and can be seen as "both a study of a specific place and an evocation of the resourcefulness of childhood" ("Podwórka, 2009"). In terms of editing, *Podwórka* is composed of six fixed shots of children playing with each other where each shot constitutes a static five-minute take. Lockhart's constrained camerawork and immobile frame prevail throughout the entire film, which proves to be a highly immersive measure along with a close gaze devoid of the horizon line or eye level that imposes a set of strict limits and a sense of entrapment. Holly Willis notes that Lockhart:

> (…) gives her subjects their space, and in place of story, character or dialogue we instead experience more abstract concepts, like the power of the frame itself, that edge around the image that marks inside from outside. But we don't just see the frame – we feel it, viscerally sensing the tension provoked when figures or objects move across its lines (Willis).

Lockhart spent three months shooting the picture and although the children's inventive and spontaneous play was in fact staged rather than filmed surreptitiously, the imagery still raises doubts in relation to its genre bordering on a documentary and performance. Interestingly, in contrast to *Pine Flat* where the subjects were shot from an eye level perspective, the Polish children are photographed in long shots and from different angles, which creates a detached perspective. It also serves to integrate them with the surrounding environment where they act, akin to *Lunch Break*'s workers, as "human elements maneuvering through industrial landscapes (…) marked by rusted pipes and seemingly defunct structures" ("The Films Of Sharon Lockhart"). Indeed, similarly to *Lunch Break*, *Podwórka*, which presents the viewers with an evocative string of vignettes of children's games, attempts to scrutinize a locality from an anthropological and avant-doc point of view in order to capture the fleeting memories of childhood, here intrinsically connected with what is perhaps a bleak, yet at the same time gleeful reality of Łódź's urban life. Kilston argues that following selected conventions of Mark Lewis' *His Children's Games, Heygate Estate* (2002), Lockhart chooses to mitigate the courtyards' severe and dilapidated surroundings by gazing at some random and natural patterns of the children's behavior in an unwavering and deadpan manner ("Sharon Lockhart's Podwórka").

Defining Slow Cinema

As suggested before, Lockhart's non-verbal formula appears to rely on selected structural film and slow cinema conventions pioneered by experimental filmmakers engaged in creating unforgettable city and landscape portraitures, including: Walter Ruttmann, Andy Warhol, Larry Gottheim, Michael Snow, David Rimmer, Robert Fenz, Benning, Hutton and other influential artists. The slow cinema aesthetics, defined a "varied strain of austere minimalist cinema" (Romney 43-44) and characterized by a frequent use of "long takes, de-centred and understated modes of storytelling, and a pronounced emphasis on quietude and the everyday" (Flanagan, "Towards an Aesthetic…"), is often perceived as a creative evolution of Paul Schrader's transcendental style or, more generally, neo-modernist trends in contemporary

cinematography (see e.g. Syska). The former notion, coined in Schrader's landmark work *Transcendental Style in Film* and evident in the cinema of Yasajiro Ozu, Robert Bresson, Carl Dreyer, Roberto Rossellini and Budd Boetticher, is expressed with a spiritual quality achieved with the lack of editorial comment or editing, austere camerawork and acting devoid of self-consciousness.[1] The term slow cinema itself was first coined by film critic Jonathan Romney as late as in 2010 with the aim of defining a trend within art cinema that surfaced as a distinctive genre of filmmaking during the 2000s. In *Sight and Sound*, Romney describes this tendency as a "varied strain of austere minimalist cinema that has thrived internationally over the past ten years," which "downplays event in favour of mood, evocativeness and an intensified sense of temporality" (43). Originally, the core assumptions of slow cinema were theorized in reference to some contemporary auteurs, including Béla Tarr, Lisandro Alonso, Gus Van Sant, Tsai Ming-liang, Pedro Costa or Albert Serra, whose works could be distinguished by a reduced narrative structure, the aesthetics of emptiness or the focus on symbolic landscape. Quandt contributes to the debate by enumerating particular aesthetic properties that have been long associated with the genre:

> (…) adagio rhythms and oblique narrative; a tone of quietude and reticence, an aura of unexplained or unearned anguish; attenuated takes, long tracking or panning shots, often of depopulated landscapes; prolonged hand-held follow shots of solo people walking; slow dollies to a window or open door framing nature; a materialist sound design; and a preponderance of Tarkovskian imagery (Quandt 76-77).

Undoubtedly, both Romney and James Quandt emphasize slowness as the most crucial descriptive factor, which, akin to the Slow Movement, deliberately opposes the majority of mainstream, fast-paced and commercial cinema productions. Meanwhile, a more elaborate discussion on "an aesthetic of slow" was fostered in Matthew Flanagan's PhD thesis, which provided a considerably accurate and detailed description of the history and some major stylistic traits of films classified as closely related or belonging to the genre (*'Slow Cinema'…*). The dissertation, which can be considered the first manuscript-length academic study of slow cinema, does not only attempt to reframe the trend in a much broader cultural context by encompassing various works of endurance art and experimental film, but it also questions the use of the label "slow" in reference to the analyzed phenomena: "As a collective term, 'slow' too readily suggests a binary opposition based on speed and motion, and signifies a range of contemporary films, filmmakers and styles in a manner that

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[1]   In light of film criticism, however, rather than to formulate a precise working definition of the proposed concept, Schrader provides his readers with a largely ambiguous, arbitrary and subjective description with little potential for film analysis. On the other hand, it seems that despite its weaknesses, Schrader's study of transcendental aesthetics has made quite a significant contribution to the development of slow cinema, seen as a distinctive genre of filmmaking. It has also given rise to some other transcendence-related theories, including Michael Bird's spiritual realism "in which cinema's technical properties become the vehicle of meditation" (15), or Vivian Sobchack's analysis of cinematic experiences from a phenomenological-existentialist perspective. More importantly, however, it has fostered a broader academic discussion on the ways in which slow cinema tends to evoke the transcendental style and stir a contemplative register through the use of stylized editing patterns characteristic for the new wave of the 1960s and beyond.

might be considered to be excessively panoptic" (*'Slow Cinema'…* 5). Throughout the entire work, however, Flanagan retains the term slow "cinema" as "the most fitting container", which has "become commonly accepted as a broad signifier of a certain mode of durational art and experimental film" and successfully accounts for "the complex network of stylistic convergences referred to here with absolute precision" (*'Slow Cinema'…* 5). Flanagan encapsulates the major characteristics of the genre as follows:

> The label 'slow cinema' refers to a model of art or experimental film that possesses a set of distinct characteristics: an emphasis upon extended duration (in both formal and thematic aspects); an audio-visual depiction of stillness and everydayness; the employment of the long take as a structural device; a slow or undramatic form of narration (if narrative is present at all); and a predominantly realist (or hyperrealist) mode or intent (*'Slow Cinema'…* 4).[2]

Although predominantly analyzed through the lens of some common aesthetic traits of slow cinema mainstream works, the scope and framework of the genre has been recently broadened to encompass the post-1960 experimental and avant-garde as well as realistic documentary films, which often emphasize both contemplative and slow aspects of the projected scenes and motives. The trend toward slowness emerged in postwar art cinema, which either explicitly or implicitly resisted the dominant capitalism-driven ideologies of mainstream culture, including: cinema, mass media or saturation advertising still prevailing in European and North American nations. David Campany pinpoints that a new sense of temporality was soon adopted in some landmark works of: Roberto Rossellini, Ingmar Bergman, Michaelangelo Antonioni, Robert Bresson, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Andrei Tarkovsky, Krzysztof Kieslowski, Aleksandr Sokurov and other significant filmmakers (10-11). A wide array of slow cinema conventions employed in those and related films did not only challenge the two-second average shot length of many Hollywood productions, but they also contributed to some representative canons of art cinema, originally proposed in David Bordwell's *Film Art* and Steve Neale's *Art Cinema as Institution*. Such representational modes, particularly leaning toward documentary realism and slowness, have been widely adopted in experimental film since the late 1940s. Tiago De Luca notes that a tendency toward realism in contemporary art cinema "is steeped in the hyperbolic application of the long take, which promotes

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[2]   Not surprisingly, a somewhat ambiguous nature of the aforementioned terminology has provoked a critical response from blogger Harry Tuttle, who considered the epithet "slow" insufficient or even redundant and suggested that it should be replaced with "contemplative." Orhan Çağlayan distinguishes between the two labels and investigates the ways they can be adopted in film analysis: "The label contemplative rightly designates the central aspects of contemporary Slow Cinema, such as its aesthetic experience and mode of address. (…) While the films deliberately avoid and reduce narrative action, contemplation becomes the meaning-seeking process by which spectators can critically engage with the films. However, contemplative as a label overlooks the fact that contemplation in cinema is not wholly specific to Slow Cinema (…). What separates Slow Cinema from these films is their perpetual stillness and monotony; in other words, Slow Cinema is generally characterized by a persistent approach to the reductive manipulation of temporality and pacing, hence the label 'slow'" (8).

a contemplative viewing experience anchored in materiality and duration" and allows the spectators to "adopt the point of view of the camera and protractedly study images as they appear on the screen in their unexplained literalness" (9, 24). On the other hand, while contemporary experimental documentary films tend to rely on a range of aesthetic principles traditionally associated with Bazinian realism, they are also likely to present an exaggerated and often deliberately distorted perception of reality. Some influential works representative of this trend include: Rossellini's *Germania anno zero*, Luchino Visconti's *La Terra Trema* (both (1948), Warhol's *Empire* (1964), Gottheim's *Fog Line* (1970), Snow's *La Région Centrale* (1971), Benning's *One Way Boogie Woogie* (1977), Fenz's *Forest of Bliss* (1986), Hutton's *Study of a River* (1997) and many others.

The Poetics of Slow Cinema in *Lunch Break* and *Podwórka*

It appears that both *Lunch Break* and *Podwórka*, generally classified as non-narrative experimental documentary films, tend to incorporate the ambivalence of the aforementioned oppositions and divisions. The primary cinematic effect, which accentuates slow and contemplative aspects of the captured footage, is the use of slow motion and long tracking shots (*Lunch Break*) as well as a fixed camera position and long takes (*Podwórka*), which contribute to distorting the spectators' temporal and spatial sensibility, simultaneously serving as a framing device for the whole work's meaningful content. It might be further argued that the films' adoption of the long take can be considered derivative of André Bazin's naive and reductionist notion of film realism, which, while drawing parallels between the indexical function of photography and cinema, favors non-fiction filmmaking seen as an imprint of reality. However, while clearly incorporating some formal innovations of slow cinema, such as the sequence shot, durational style centered on the long take, the aesthetics of emptiness, a pronounced emphasis on quietude and the everyday or contemplative spectatorial practice, the pictures clearly resist the elimination of editing. Particularly *Lunch Break* draws extensively on montage, which deliberately distorts and dramatizes a real sense of time, hence rendering it close to the concept of modernist time and amplifying an emotional resonance of the imagery. Meanwhile, *Podwórka* experiments with slow cinema aesthetics by means of long, uninterrupted fixed-frame shots and some atypical camera angles, which do not fall under any standard camera angles, including an eye-level, point of view, high-angle, low-angle, bird's-eye or worm's-eye view, and stress the film's ambiguity reflected in their lack of conventional meaning or clarity. What is more, both pictures' reliance on art and slow cinema's documentary and sensory realism, here seen in the use of real life locations, authorial expressivity and ambiguity, open-ended narrative or pensive ending, is being constantly tested through Lockhart's occasional references to film-performance evident in the artist's attempt to "invite the spectator to undergo a visual and auditory experience" (Schneider and Pasqualino 4).

Unsurprisingly, non-narrative experimental filmmakers working in the realist mode have sought inspiration from early films of the Lumière brothers and, as a result, combined, as put by Hutton, an "extremely reductive strategy" with an uncomplicated observational practice (MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 3* 247). MacDonald

asserts that the Lumières' cinematography exemplifies the tradition of filmmaking, which employs aspects of the slow cinema aesthetics and Schrader's transcendental style, particularly evident in the use of extended shot and duration: "the goal (…) is much the same: to focus attention – an almost meditative level of attention – on subject matter normally ignored or marginalised by mass-entertainment film, and, by doing so, to reinvigorate our reverence for the visual world around us and develop our patience for experiencing it fully" (*Avant-Garde Film* 11-12). Meanwhile, Flanagan argues that works of contemporary observational cinema are strictly based on the structural film representational modes, primarily the fixed frame and extended duration, and tend to convey a largely unmediated or sometimes uninterrupted representation of reality (*Slow Cinema* 44). In light of the aforementioned assumptions, it may be argued that *Lunch Break* and *Podwórka*, while revisiting some structural film's minimal narrative and visual tropes, provide their audience with a far more engaging cinematic experience, particularly in terms of editing influenced by elements of cinéma vérité.

Indeed, Lockhart's questioning of some conventional notions of space and time through creative montage, such as the use of nonstandard camera movements and angles, slow motion or synchronous sounds, is also common for cinéma vérité's superstructure whose focus is on minimizing the presence of the camera. In line with the genre's principles, the artist seems to record "objective" reality, to a large extent, in an attempt to reveal or rediscover a cinematic truth and highlight often neglected subjects (see e.g. Bruzzi 67, Rosenthal 7), hence presenting an avant-doc construction of reality. On the other hand, although both films oppose the use of some cinéma vérité's technology and filming methods, primarily the use of hand-held cameras, they distort the mise-en-scène rather than render it an uninterrupted and unmanipulated representation of the events on screen. In this way, while Lockhart exposes her viewers to a number of uncontrolled or "real" situations, she simultaneously edits the footage in order to re-create the surrounding reality and leave much room for individual interpretation. From the point of view of visual anthropology, this measure clearly serves to problematize the question of "closeness and distance to the ethnographic subject and the multiple viewpoints of the participant observer" through combining "a more disengaged, objective scientific documentation" with "a more interpretive and creative style" (Schneider and Pasqualino 2).

The Sublime Urban Landscape in *Podwórka*

Interestingly, in *Podwórka*, seen as "an uncanny document of the microcosmic world and social order that rules Łódź's courtyards," both types of the aforementioned stylistic traits are grounded in a distinctively U.S. tradition of depicting sublime qualities of natural scenery, which goes back to the 19th century Hudson River School movement and was later adopted in 20th century American cinematic landscapes, including those featured by many independent and avant-garde productions ("Sharon Lockhart at Kunstmuseum Luzern").[3] While both *Lunch Break* and *Podwórka* "invite

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[3]   The concept of the sublime, first proposed in 18th century European aesthetics and further discussed by Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer or William

meditation and contemplation, and each works against the bustle of contemporary living, the fury of information, and the distraction of multi-tasking" (Willis), in the latter film, "despite the innocence of the children's actions, the lack of supervision and the camera's deadpan gaze lends a subtle sense of unease" (Kilston). Indeed, Lockhart's work draws quite extensively on the sublime on a visual level to juxtapose a highly impersonal and detached urban landscape with youthful spontaneity and vitality. Brian Rajski asserts that "Lockhart's static camera and distant perspective emphasize the rigid coldness of the city's grey, crumbling, concrete structures," yet at the same time "this formal, photographic detachment is undercut by the personal, cinematic inhabitation of these spaces by different groups of children who move in, around, and out of the space framed by the camera" ("Sharon Lockhart: Podwórka (2009)"). Therefore, the settings seem to merge the sublime stillness of Łódź's urban landscape with an anthropological film's observational practice aimed at documenting the blithe moments of childhood:

> The remarkable ingenuity, as well as agility, of the children, who transform decaying buildings into playground obstacle courses, not only demonstrates the transfigurative capabilities of youth, but also acts dialectically to underscore that the perspective offered by Lockhart's camera is a constructive, selective one, an aesthetic frame likely quite foreign to the film's subjects (Rajski, "Sharon Lockhart: Podwórka (2009)").

However, in contrast to the Hudson River School-inspired depictions of sublime scenery where the human element is largely diminished, Lockhart's frame captures and uplifts the collective-singular protagonist as well as juxtaposes their authenticity against "the striking beauty of the ordinary and the unique dimension of the world" while touching upon the philosophical questions of human existence and condition or universality of time ("Sharon Lockhart MILENA, MILENA").

The Technological Sublime in *Lunch Break*

Meanwhile, *Lunch Break*'s imagery appears to seek inspiration from the technological sublime, which transferred a sense of "awe and wonder often tinged with an element of terror" from the natural environment to the original and present-day technological achievements of the industrial revolution, including: factories, skyscrapers, aviation, automobiles, computer and space technology or the cityscape in general (Nye xvi).[4] As suggested before, the use of slow motion reveals and dramatizes "every

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Gilpin, was inseparably connected with the Hudson River school's strands of pastoral elegiac and scientific exoticism and later ideologically related to Turner's Frontier Thesis and Manifest Destiny (see e.g. Allen 27, Carmer 19-24, Driscoll 8-20, Nash 67-71).

[4]   Originally proposed in Leo Marx's famous work, *The Machine in the Garden*, the concept was ideally supposed to strive for the "middle landscape" through reconciling the machine with the pristine and pastoral wilderness. One of its earliest descriptions, however, was proposed by Charles Caldwell in the 1832 issue of the *New England Magazine*: "Objects of exalted power and grandeur elevate the mind that seriously dwells on them, and impart to it greater compass and strength. Alpine scenery and an embattled ocean deepen contemplation, and give their own sublimity to the conception of beholders. The same will be true of our system of Railroads. Its vastness and magnificence will prove communicable, and add to the

detail of the claustrophobically hemmed-in environment," which features, as listed by Brian Sholis, "dented garbage cans and putty-colored lockers, some adorned with stickers; olive-green tool chests and brightly colored plastic coolers; gauges that cling to pipes stretching from floor to ceiling; and tubes and hoses that extend every which way, all beneath drab, uniform fluorescent light" ("Parts and Labor"). Undoubtedly, the primary special effect that enhances a sense of technological sublime is the footage's dilatory pace, which aims to accentuate the gravity of the featured corridor replete with the plentitude of industrial machinery. Interestingly, the act of moving down the hallway itself, along with the soundtrack, plays a clearly symbolic function and largely reinforces a haunting effect of the imagery through its reliance on "repeating moments of apparent stillness both facilitating contemplation and kindling suspense" (Marks, "Act. Repeat. Suspend"). Furthermore, Sholis notes that "the unhurriedness also imparts a monumental solemnity to each of the workers' gestures":

> A man sitting to the left of the aisle with a water bottle in hand, momentarily looking at the floor, becomes, when slowed down, a despondent ruminator seemingly lifted from one of Bill Viola's histrionic video installations. On the other hand, when, midway through the film, another man reaching above the lockers pulls a bag of popcorn out of an unseen microwave, the humor of his banal action deflates the portentousness that can cloud such snail-paced scrutiny (Sholis, "Parts and Labor").

It seems then that Lockhart's deadpan gaze is deeply humanitarian, philanthropic and "intimate in (…) [its] focus on everyday situations" (Eckmann) as the artist literally documents "the minute, humble signs of humanity, captured at such a quotidian level that the viewer cannot help but be moved to the core" ("Sharon Lockhart Lunch Break with Exit" 1). As in the case of *Podwórka*, *Lunch Break*'s "congealed time and choreographed operatic grandeur" turns its meditative gaze to the collective-singular protagonist studied both as a part of the community and an individual in their undertaking of some mundane and anti-heroic leisurely activities: "Engaged yet markedly without emotion, Lockhart's 'documentary theater' captures rare moments of human vulnerability where authenticity and spontaneity are challenged by her own long-term commitment and research as well as a desire to choreograph particular situations and behaviors" ("Sharon Lockhart Lunch Break with Exit" 2). The camera, which traverses exactly fifty feet, confounds the storyline and places the audience in a thoughtful relationship to the footage, encouraging a more active and embodied form of spectatorship. Specifically, the film's duration motivates the viewer, who is given a nostalgic glimpse into of the workers' fatigue and idleness, to work with their attention and perception as well as interpret the featured scene in the broader context of the present-day condition of the U.S. economy, factory labor, work ethic and the automation of manufacturing: "*Lunch Break*'s gradual passage through the aged factory offers a meditative and melancholic reflection on the

standard of the intellect of the country" (195). Some more recent analyses of the technological sublime, the most notable of which include David E. Nye's monograph, define the notion as a distinctively American formation and "an essentially religious feeling, aroused by the confrontation with impressive objects," which has become "self-justifying parts of a national destiny, just as the natural sublime once undergirded the rhetoric of manifest destiny" (xiii).

architectural, social and phenomenological space of a notably anachronistic mode of industrialized labor" ("Timestage…"). Moreover, Rob Marks attributes the picture's slowness to the larger Slow Movement: "If speed seems to be the bugaboo of our age, critiqued for its narcotic-like capacity to gratify a sensation-seeking society's desire for stimulation, then slowness (…) offers another avenue toward the great rumbling revelation of experience: an opening (…) into the expansive world of the imagination" ("Act. Repeat. Suspend").

Conclusion

As can be seen, Lockhart's legacy, whether it investigates the conditions of childhood or physical labor, employs a formal and minimalist approach of a stationary camera and self-conscious framing while hinting at larger questions of human experience and socio-political statements to generate "a sense of uncanny instability corresponding with the psychological condition of the portrayed" ("Sharon Lockhart at Kunstmuseum Luzern"). Although the filmmaker's legacy has been predominantly classified, akin to Hutton's or Benning's works, as representing the slow cinema aesthetics (MacDonald, *Avant-doc* 2, "Panorama" 636), it seems to have taken some of its formal traits to their extreme through juxtaposing stillness and movement of the imagery with "filmic time, subjective time, and real time in mediations on ritual, landscape, and labour" (Kuhn and Westwell 381). While *Lunch Break* focuses on the representation of American labor at a Maine shipyard and *Podwórka* centers on a group of Polish children in the courtyards of Łódź, both works develop the concept of an industrial landscape and community engagement through their reliance on creative montage and editing, which draw on experimental and anthropological film practice, structural films' and cinéma vérité's stylistics tropes as well as the natural and technological sublime. To achieve the desired effect, Lockhart experiments and expands slow cinema's typical devices like an extended shot duration, fixed camera position, minimalism and austerity or anti-narrative by the use of vertical planes, Z-axis, a single tracking shot slowed down to three frames per second, extremely long takes, atypical camera angles or a detached perspective. Consequently, the spectator is confronted with a distorted and dramatized sense of space and time (*Lunch Break*), an unconventional and largely ambiguous narrative content and occasional references to ciné-transe and film-performance (*Lunch Break* and *Podwórka*) where "an authentic document (…) has slipped into the realm of senses and the experiential" (Wallis, "Unfixed Landscape…").

In the 1999 issue of *Los Angeles Magazine*, George Melrod noted that Lockhart's "sleekly anthropological films and photos reflect a continual exploration of 'otherness,' with the interaction of foreign cultures and our urge to project our own associations onto them in search of common ground," often bordering on the mundane and the surreal (170). Indeed, the statement seems to embody the artist's contribution to the present day avant-garde and experimental film centered around formally rigorous and socially perceptive observations and re-enactments of the everyday, also serving as more general reflections on human existence. As put by Kathy Geritz, Lockhart's "theatrical tableaux blur the distinctions between moving and still images and offer time to engage intimately with the acts of looking and listening" by

means of long takes, dynamic mise-en-scène and strictly composed fixed frames. Both visually compelling and ethnographically-oriented, the filmmaker's works confuse the line between conceptual art and documentary reportage and are almost equally attentive to portraiture and landscape, immersing the spectators into the quotidian moments of individuals juxtaposed against natural or urban settings. Interestingly, Lockhart's most recent cinematic project, *Antoine/Milena* (2015), which features Milena re-enacting the final scene from François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (1959), is yet another manifestation of her personal and professional ties to Poland nurtured through her frequent engagement in the Polish art scene where she often pays tribute to school-age girls. Perhaps, the artist's representation of the Polish pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale might give rise to some future and equally inspiring works and activities, which, while delving into various dimensions of local community empowerment, will contribute to contemporary American-Polish avant-garde and experimental filmmaking.

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