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A photograph of a person from behind, wearing a plaid shirt, dark pants, and a large tan backpack. They are standing in a grassy field with a dense forest in the background. The lighting is warm, suggesting late afternoon or early morning. The image is split vertically down the middle.

Sharon Lockhart makes rigorously formal films  
that complicate the boundaries between fact and fiction  
by *Michael Ned Holte*

# The Observer



## In Lockhart's films the distance between fact and fiction is impossible to measure.

longer than those in the second, in which two or more children interact despite the rigorous structure imposed throughout the film, the viewer's durational experience does not necessarily match the expectations of mechanical time. Two or more children demand exponentially more attention than one, and our experience of the ten-minute shot accelerates. Duration also becomes a sort of frame: for each shot Lockhart and editor Erika Vogt carefully extract ten-minute lengths of film that render the fixed duration seemingly pliable.

The film's intermission presents the sound of a boy (Balam Garcia, who recently recorded an album with Lockhart) performing a solo guitar-and-vocal rendition of Blink-182's 'Stay Together for the Kids'. The young musician, perhaps performing 'alone' in his bedroom, brings a poignant complexity to the otherwise corny pop Punk song (originally performed by a group of overgrown 'kids') as he stretches the song into a meandering, slightly dark, ten-minute ballad of the imaginary. Relieved of visual indicators, we can only locate the child in the vast *somewhere* of his interiority.

Throughout the film sound takes on a powerful presence. Unlike Hollywood films, in which the given environmental sounds are rendered subsidiary to dialogue or, conversely, are heightened to reinforce some

significant narrative drive, the sound design of *Pine Flat* puts the children on the same level as the surrounding environment. At times the ambient sounds overwhelm the subjects. For example, the boy and girl swimming in the eighth shot move around freely in the water yet never break the artificial boundary of the camera's frame. There is a sense of vastness, as the water appears to continue outside the frame indefinitely, but the sound suggests something quite different: the dense echoing of the children's voices disrupts our apprehension of their words and further evidences the imposing enclosure of their immediate surroundings.

Throughout the film we hear children talking, but it is often difficult to make out the exact words being spoken. (Abundant laughter, on the other hand, is more easily translated.) Like *Khalil, Shaun, A Woman under the Influence* - in which the first two segments are totally silent - we are reminded that the filmmaker is very much in control of the access that we, as viewers, have to the subjects in front of the camera. However, *Pine Flat* is not silent. Here Lockhart uses a complexly constructed sound design to heighten the viewer's attention to what he or she is seeing. She also uses sound to colour the factuality of the image with the larger presence of the imaginary. The wolf's howl in the first shot, for example, may or may not be 'real'.

The frame, as a perceived boundary, is most often challenged - or circumvented - by the presence of sound. In the sixth shot of *Pine Flat* a boy, dwarfed by his baggy clothes and huge backpack, waits for a school bus. He ambles, ever so slightly, along a short imaginary

line. This path is, not coincidentally, bounded on the left and right sides by the camera's frame. Eventually, a distinct sound emerges. Then, we see it: a school bus moves into sight deep in the frame, across a valley from the boy. The bus moves along a line almost parallel to him and leaves the frame. We still hear it, as it moves closer, still off-screen. It comes to a stop, somewhere behind the camera, and the boy walks towards it. His exit from the frame - a rare occurrence in the film - suggests an almost hyperbolic sense of freedom and presents a moment of true drama, with some sense of narrative relief, if not resolve.

Lockhart's use of sound suggests an acute awareness of its materiality and its refusal of the frame's constraints. Working with frequent collaborator Becky Allen, Lockhart 'stages' the sound with as much care and precision as she does the visual information that receives the viewer's primary attention. From the first shot of the film - in which we hear an off-screen voice that never becomes an on-screen voice - Lockhart and Allen construct much of the film's imaginary from outside the frame. Certainly, much of the sound was recorded on location - defined, appropriately enough, as 'wild' sound - yet it also seems that many content-rich sounds in the film were created or added in post-production. How much in *Pine Flat* is fact and how much is fiction, and how much is structured and how much given over to chance is difficult to answer here.

In one of the most simple, static shots in *Pine Flat* a young boy horizontally bisects the frame, lying at the edge of a hill, legs bent, sleeping. Or is he pretending to sleep? As the

centre of attention in a still frame, it would be impossible not to notice his movements, however subtle. The prone boy shifts around, either uncomfortable while positioned on the ground or lost in the depth of a dream. Here the cinematic medium fails to register difference. Has the boy been directed to sleep by Lockhart, and is he slightly restlessly attempting to do so? Or has he been directed to *pretend* to sleep? Either way, the subjects in *Pine Flat* – particularly when filmed in isolation – invariably draw attention to the camera and hence the director located somewhere behind it. The screen itself is, in effect, the fifth side of the frame, and, like the other four sides, it represents a rather complex boundary between the seen and the vaster unseen. Lockhart maintains the tension between index and imaginary because it is difficult for the viewer to know with any precision when her subjects are being themselves or only pretending to.

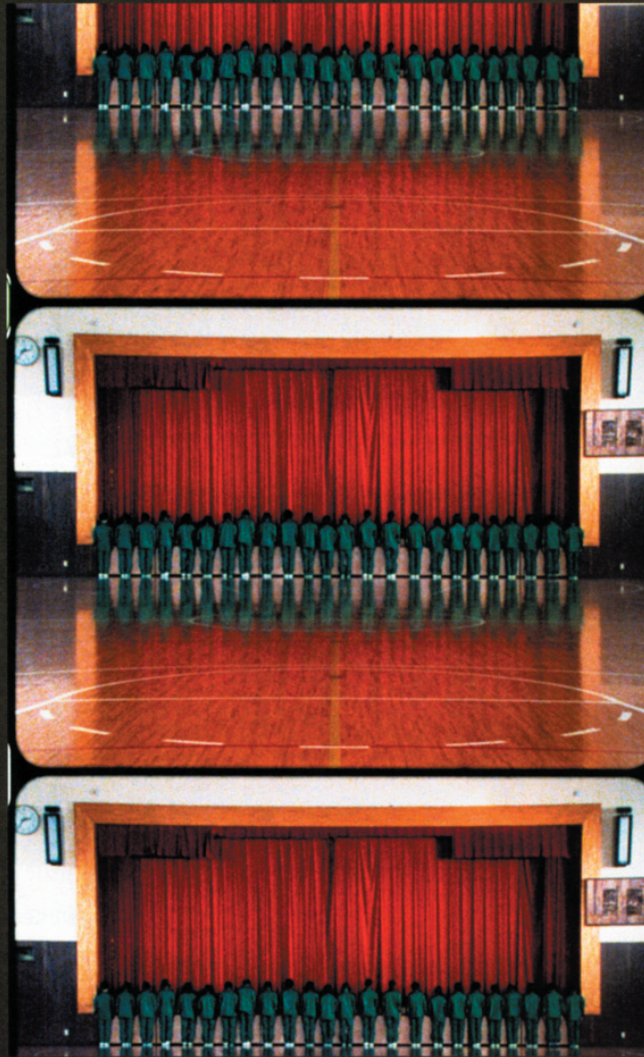
There is a question of performance lurking here – not only a question of whether or not these children are assuming a persona or playing a ‘character’, but perhaps a more pointed question of to what extent are these children performing for a camera while attempting to please the director. In *Teatro Amazonas* the camera frames a crowd at the theatre and for its 30-minute duration captures the unscripted, and generally unexpected, activities of individuals emerging from the mass audience. Lockhart’s presence is seemingly invisible: she could easily have started the camera and left the scene. Her presence is similarly negligible in *NŌ*, as the Japanese farmers complete a predetermined – choreographed – task. However, in her films occupied by children, including the basketball-playing girls in *Goshogaoka*, her position as director evolves into a more complex role as authority figure, or perhaps a surrogate parent. When a girl in *Goshogaoka* drops the ball or flubs a dribble, one wonders if the look of disappointment is intended for Lockhart or merely a natural response.

This dynamic becomes more ambiguous in *Pine Flat*, as the children are not performing objective tasks so much as just being ‘themselves’. Lockhart ingrained herself in a small community and placed a number of children she met there in front of the camera. She is

**Opposite:**  
*Teatro Amazonas*  
1999  
Film still

**Right:**  
*Goshogaoka*  
1997  
Film stills

**Below:**  
*Pine Flat*  
2005  
Production still



not exactly telling their respective stories so much as finding – and constructing – a meeting place between her subjects and the imaginary their filmed presence generates. How much of *Pine Flat* is random, and how much is directed by Lockhart – or rather, performed by her subjects – is unclear, but the ambiguity is potent, and hovers insistently at the surface. There is seemingly an implicit contract between Lockhart and the children in the film: her camera’s frame is a boundary that contains their physical presence, but, in exchange, the children are free to keep their interior worlds ‘off-screen’. Another contract – between filmmaker and viewer – also emerges: without access to that vast interiority we are asked to use our imaginations and draw our own map of *Pine Flat*.

*Michael Ned Holte is a writer living in Los Angeles.*

<sup>1</sup> Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1982  
<sup>2</sup> P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943–2000*, 3rd edn, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2001, p. 348