

Philippa Lovatt, 'Slow Sounds: Duration, Audition and Labour in Liu Jiayin's *Oxhide* and *Oxhide II*' in Nuno Barradas Jorge and Tiago de Luca (eds.), *Slow Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp. 192-203

In discussions of slow cinema, it is often claimed that the use of extended takes provides spectators with space and time to contemplate the image but, in this essay, I shall argue that, for these films, sound is also an important part of the experience of cinematic duration. In slow cinema, soundscapes composed of location sound recording, field recordings and an absence (or minimal use) of musical score, foreground the material and sensory nature of matter on-screen thus enabling a sense of 'connectedness' between the acoustic space of reception and that of the diegesis.

Films by 'slow' directors, such as Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Jia Zhangke, and Lisandro Alonso, for example, capture the mundanity of the everyday while creating an immersive experience for the spectator through long takes and a sound design that produces a dense auditory field. Shifts in pitch and timbre draw in the spectator more deeply, submerging us into the diegetic world of the film that is at times populated by the heavy drone of insect life, the violent sway of leaves in the trees or the reverberation of traffic noise. At other times, however, the films grant a sense of intimacy (sometimes uncomfortably so) through very localised sounds that appear too near or strangely audible considering their point of origin within the visual field. Often recalling the use of sound in structural/materialist film, in slow cinema ambient sound can become noise; detached from signification, the auditory dimension loses 'meaning' and becomes 'feeling', experienced on and through the body of the spectator, at the same time as it is experienced by characters on-screen (Suárez, 2008: 86; Lovatt, 2013: 65).¹

Unlike those of the filmmakers mentioned above, the films of Beijing director Liu Jiayin do not feature expansive rural landscapes or urban cityscapes in which the sounds of the natural or industrial worlds permeate and help shape the characters' day-to-day existence. Instead, Liu's stories take place within a confined interior and yet her use of diegetic sound and extended duration to communicate her characters' subjective experience of space and time in contemporary Beijing have a similar effect to that described above. Drawing from the fields of acoustic ecology and phenomenology, this chapter will discuss sound, duration and labour in *Oxhide* (Niupi, 2005) and *Oxhide II* (Niupi er, 2009), addressing their significance in the context of contemporary independent Chinese cinema, and, more broadly, it will attempt to open up some questions about what kinds of knowledge or understanding this embodied experience of sound in slow cinema might produce.

Oxhide was made in 2005 when Liu was twenty-three and still a student at the Beijing Film Academy. It takes place in her family home, a small apartment near Guangqumen in the Dongcheng District of Beijing, and she plays a fictional version of herself, named 'Beibe', while her father Liu Zaiping and mother Jia Huifen play themselves. The film tells the story of her father's failing leather-work business and the family's reaction to it over the course of 110 minutes in twenty-three static, carefully composed shots. *Oxhide II* concentrates the action on just one room within the apartment and takes place solely around the table on which Liu Zaiping handles the leather, and later, the family prepares dumplings together as part of their New Year rituals. This film ventures further into minimalism, as over 133

minutes, the camera moves 360 degrees around the table in just nine shots at 45 degree increments filming from above, across and below the table to reduce time and space. Within this framework, we are witness to the anxieties, disappointments and affections that bind the family together.

Like other examples of slow Chinese films discussed in this book, such as Wang Bing's *West of the Tracks* (*Tie Xi Qu*, 2003) and Jia Zhangke's *24 City* (*Er shi si cheng ji*, 2008), *Oxhide I* and *II* present a profoundly humanist perspective on the impact of capitalism on ordinary people's lives in the People's Republic of China, and seem to offer a particular kind of resistance to the accelerating velocity of the country's market-driven reforms. Set against the backdrop of Beijing's rapid development in the mid to late 2000s, when many of the older parts of the city were being demolished to make way for new skyscrapers and commercial properties, Liu's films are a record of cultural memory and heritage that persist despite the threat of obsolescence.² This chapter contends that the acoustic dimension of the films plays a particularly important role in capturing the poignancy of this historical moment because of the material nature of sound itself. As Walter Ong writes, 'Sound exists only when it is going out of existence. It is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent, and it is sensed as evanescent . . . If I stop the movement of sound, I have nothing – only silence, no sound at all' (Ong, 2002: 32). Ong's words describe the durative temporality of sound, at the same time as evoking its fragility, thus echoing and underscoring the films' treatment of the disappearance not only of space and time but also of cultural practices and shared heritage.

First-person Film-making and China's New Documentary Movement

Luke Robinson describes the recent shift in China's New Documentary Movement away from films recorded in public spaces, that focus on 'public topics' (*gonggong huati*) such as the nation, history, ethnicity, or the state, towards 'what is increasingly described as the siren, the "private" documentary' (Robinson, 2010: 177). While *Oxhide* and *Oxhide II* are fictional dramas based on real events, the connection between Liu's work and the documentary movement that focuses on 'individual, sometimes even autobiographical, emotional experiences; the familial; and internal domestic spaces' is important (177). In her essay 'First-Person Documentary in Twenty- First Century China', Tianqi Yu takes this point further and explains that the development of first-person filmmaking by women at the beginning of the twenty-first century corresponds with China's move towards de-collectivisation and individualisation. Yu explains that films such as *Oxhide I* and *II*, Wang Fen's *They Are Not the Only Unhappy Couple* (*Bu kuaile de buzhi yige*, 2000), Yang Lina's *Home Video* (*Jiating luxiang*, 2001), and Song Fang's *Memories Look at Me* (*Ji yi wang zhe wo*, 2012), differ from the documentaries made by male filmmakers because they 'highlight a personal vision, by bringing their own intimate familial spaces to wider audiences and reflexively turning themselves into key characters in the films' (Yu, 2014: 23).

I have discussed elsewhere how sound design can communicate the atmosphere of the era in which a film is set at the same time as expressing characters' subjective experiences of it (Lovatt, 2012: 419). The formal aspects of Liu's films and, specifically, her use of synchronised sound and the long take, foreground her protagonists' anxieties around the

commodification of time in postsocialist China. As in *24 City*, this anxiety presents itself sonically through the recurrent motif of a ticking clock which occurs at the very beginning of *Oxhide* and is heard intermittently throughout both films. Like the vibration of the nearby train that we hear (and sense) each time it rumbles past bringing commuters into the economic centre of Beijing, the sound seems to embody China's metanarrative of progress and development that conceptualises temporality as linear and forward moving, encoded historically by the rhythmic sounds of industry and production (Lovatt, 2012: 435). This understanding of time is, as Bliss Cua Lim describes: 'a means of exercising social, political, and economic control over periods of work and leisure [that] obscures the ceaselessly changing plurality of our existence in time' (Lim, 2009:11). This tension is evident in the extended prologue before the title sequence of the second film when Beibei's mother, Jia Huifen, returns from the marketplace and obliquely criticises her husband, suspecting him of being idle while she was away. Their dialogue reveals in particular the subjective experience of duration as well as an internalised pressure not to 'waste' time by being unproductive. Offscreen, we hear the bang of the door outside the apartment and again as Huifen opens and closes the inner door to their home.

Liu Zaiping. That was quick.

Jia Huifen. Quick? It took me over an hour.

Liu Zaiping. [pause] I'm the slow one then . . .

Jia Huifen. [pause] Is the G3 bag template ready yet? [pause]. Oh, you're still threading the needle. Didn't I thread the needles for you before I went out?

They then decide to move the table slightly to create more space to work before the title, *Oxhide II*, appears on the screen after just over twenty leisurely minutes of running time.

The Labour of Production

As with *West of the Tracks* and Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* (*Sanxia haoren*, 2006), both *Oxhide I* and *II* not only foreground labour through the depiction of the production of goods and food but also the labour involved in making the film itself (see Jorge and Smith's chapters in this volume). In this respect, Liu's work is very different from the spontaneous, 'on-the-spot' (*xianchang*) realism of the New Documentary Movement and the *vérité* feature films of the 'Sixth' or 'Urban Generation' which are characterised by visual and aural instability, and the contingent (Zhang, 2007; Berry et al., 2010). By contrast, despite similarly using non-professional actors and location setting, *Oxhide* and, even more so, *Oxhide II* are highly controlled works. Though they are 'home movies' of sorts, recorded in real time and re-enacting events that had happened to the family, the films were fully scripted and rehearsed over many months before shooting took place. Yet, within this formal rigour, the films maintain some of the intimacy of the 'home movie' through the family's performance of quotidian routines, their sometimes banal conversations, their silences and, perhaps most importantly, *their recording of themselves* in the setting of their real living space. The family's performance also enacts the transference of embodied memories – the 'passing on'

of the skills of wonton cookery from parent to child – as the location sound recording captures ‘the micro-epistemologies and everyday terrains of auditory experience’ (LaBelle, 2010: xxv).

Liu’s attention to the intimate settings of everyday life and the dynamics of family relationships can be compared to that of Yasujiro Ozu, and her work shares some of the ‘playfulness’ of his techniques (such as shooting in 360-degree space) that David Bordwell argues makes ‘spatial and temporal relations ambiguous’ (Bordwell, 1988: 118). Liu’s visual aesthetic flattens the perspective, producing a narrow depth of field, and, like Ozu, often uses a very low camera angle. However, while Ozu uses architectural framing to ‘maintain a sense of harmony and balance in the face of narrative events that threaten the stability of home and family’, Liu’s tight framing and extended takes express the opposite: an intense and prolonged claustrophobia (Russell, 2003: 97). In this way, the spatial dynamics of the domestic setting seem both to embody and to reinforce the family’s anxieties over the pressures of everyday life in China’s new market economy.

Liu created a makeshift widescreen frame by taping up the lens of a cheap digital camera. The use of widescreen 2.35:1 aspect ratio is usually associated with films that depict wide-open spaces or stage performances, yet here, Liu deploys this technique to ‘show less’ in a manner reminiscent of the minimalist techniques of Robert Bresson (even though Bresson, of course, never utilised the widescreen format).³ By placing the camera close to the protagonists’ bodies, the vertical space is reduced, cropping parts of the body in order to concentrate our attention on the family’s hands at work: sewing oxhide, kneading dough, chopping vegetables or stuffing dumplings (Bordwell, 2009).

While the darkness of the image and the highly ‘reduced’ framing could have a distancing effect because of the way it denies the spectator full access to the dramatic action (or what Metz described as ‘mastery’ over the image [Metz, 1982]), the auditory dimension serves to expand the diegesis, creating an immersive experience that allows the spectator a degree of intimacy with the characters and with the domestic setting as the narrative unfolds in real time.

Figure 13.1 The family’s hands preparing dumplings, *Oxhide II* (2009).



‘Concrete’ Sounds and Acoustic Space

Though sparse, sound in Liu’s films is spatial and dynamic. In sound design, spatial depth is usually achieved through the inclusion of ambient or environmental sounds. What Michel Chion terms ‘materializing sound indices’ are noises (‘concrete sounds’) that ‘flesh out’ the scene by providing acoustic depth and texture, endowing it with the ‘feeling’ of the real (Chion, 1994: 114).⁴ Because the framing of the image is so restricted, and the setting only partially lit, shifting the focus from the visual to the auditory as a primary mode of engagement at certain points in *Oxhide I* and *II* serves to provide clarity, helping the spectator understand the dynamics of the space by sonically describing the objects and surfaces within it. The sound design draws attention to the acoustic properties of the apartment, thereby capturing what Brandon LaBelle calls ‘an auditory geography [that] exists . . . within the very meeting or interweaving of noise and silence’ (2010: 47).

The absence of an external shot of the building or the neighbourhood to help situate the viewer and locate the narrative geographically means that we are held within the cramped interior of the apartment for the duration of both films. The only slight relief offered is through a small window in the room where Liu Zaiping works that allows in some natural light but, rather than illuminating the scene, the light casts his body into silhouette, restricting further an emotional engagement with the character via the image. At another point in *Oxhide*, when the family searches for their missing cat, we are allowed a glimpse of the outside world through another small, curtained window. Even this brief moment of relief is denied to us in the second film, however, where the camera does not leave its position at the edge of the table. The sense of claustrophobia is heightened further by the soundtrack: within the apartment itself, there is a surprising absence of mediated sound technologies – in particular, no radio or ambient television – nor are there any audible broadcasts from the street outside or from neighbouring apartments. This means that no other voices or perspectives (official or otherwise) can be heard other than those of the family, and our aural attention remains focused on the protagonists and the noises produced by their exertions and their immediate environment.⁵

Moreover Liu’s films use neither diegetic nor non-diegetic music to provide emotional cues, and yet, the absence of music does not mean that the two films do not have their own ‘musical’ rhythms. For example, the percussive ‘concrete’ sounds of the mother, father and daughter chopping, stirring and rolling dough on the table juxtaposed against the many protracted instances of room tone, when the protagonists choose not to speak, provide rhythm, timbre and phrasing that affect the mood and pacing of the scenes that, in more conventional narrative cinema, may well be achieved through a musical score or through editing. As well as providing cinematic rhythm, however, they also provide insights into the micro-rhythms of the family’s everyday life and their patterns of work and leisure. The idiosyncratic squeaks of the apartment’s doors as people come and go, the rumble of the train that vibrates the whole apartment every half hour or so, and the metronomic ticking of the clock, as well as their own ‘bodily’ sounds (their slurps, sighs, sniffs and speech) provide the soundtrack with a pulse; these are what Don Ihde refers to as the ‘flux and flow’ of such ‘daily sounds’ that embody the ‘rhythmic temporal movements of sound’ (Ihde, 2007: 87).

Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan note that acoustic space is not temporally or spatially bound but is constantly evolving:

auditory space has no point of favored focus. It's a sphere without fixed boundaries, space made by the thing itself, not space containing a thing. It is not a pictorial space boxed in, but dynamic, always in flux, creating its own dimensions moment by moment. (Carpenter and McLuhan, 1960: 67)

As mentioned above, in both *Oxhide I* and *II*, the location sound recording maps out the acoustic dynamics of the apartment as the soundtrack foregrounds the materiality of sounds within, and from just beyond, the space. While the visual framing of Liu's films contains the narrative within the apartment walls, it could be argued that the soundscape, by contrast, communicates a sense of space-time that is 'in flux', and thus potentially resistant to that sense of containment or control. In this way, the musicality and dynamism of the films' 'slow sounds' suggest a formal politics that counters the regulation of time and space in post-socialist and capitalist discourse.

On a functional level, we understand how the rooms connect to each other and to the outside world primarily through our sense of hearing. To do this, Liu makes extensive use of off-screen space and uses sound to communicate information about that which is just beyond the visual frame and the protagonists' movement through it. András Bálint Kovács suggests that in Bresson's films, this use of off-screen space is 'metonymic' in that 'narrative information is provided, especially by sound effects, from off-screen space that extends just beyond what is . . . visible onscreen. In other words, much of the plot is taking place in spaces not seen but contiguously attached to onscreen space' (Kovács, 2008: 142). Kovács goes on to explain that, in cinema, off-screen space is frequently used in this way for two purposes. Firstly, to 'enhance dramatic tension, to raise the viewer's curiosity, which . . . is then satisfied later by showing what was unseen before'. And secondly, 'to reduce information redundancy: part of the information is conveyed only by two channels, not by three: either by time and sight (we see what is happening) or by time and sound (we hear what is happening)' (142). Kovács's discussion of 'minimalist use of off-screen space' is useful for thinking about how Liu's sound design similarly allows us to hear events that we do not see: acousmatic sounds originating in off-screen space are never 'de-acousmatised', to use Chion's term, in order to satisfy the spectator's curiosity (Chion, 1994).

In Liu's films the only sound from the outside world, aside from some muffled conversations from the corridor or street outside, to penetrate the walls of the apartment is the deep resonance of the train mentioned briefly above. It is heard at several points in both films, and its presence, though fleeting, is dramatic, causing the fabric of the building to vibrate, shaking the table and the objects on its surface. The irony is that, although for the spectator, the intrusion of this external body is disruptive and disturbing, the characters themselves barely register its presence: the father alone seems to be bothered by it. Tellingly, within the overall aural environment (what Ihde calls the 'enduring gestalt'), it is the more personal sounds connected to character, embodiment, memory and ritual that capture their attention as, at times, the sounds themselves seem to become almost extensions of the characters (or at least of how they see one another and themselves).⁶ In *Oxhide II*, for example, Beibei's parents try to teach her their skills, and a train rushes past:

Beibei. Listen to that. Quiet for a moment. Listen.

Liu Zaiping [to Beibei]. All I can hear is the sound of the train.

Jia Huifen. When mum does it there's a sound. Did you hear it? She's better than you at it. Liu Zaiping [audibly pulling apart some of the dough. Beibei leans forward and puts her ear to her father's hands]. Your poor skills have rubbed off on me now.

Beibei. That's not the right sound. You made it on purpose.

Jia Huifen. [a quick snap as she pulls apart the dough]. Let me finish them off.

Beibei [to her father]. Listen to that. There's a sound as she pulls it off.

While the train is a recurrent motif in Asian cinema, which often signifies hopes and anxieties around modernity, industrialisation, and mobility, here its presence *within* the acoustic ambience of the home seems to act as a reminder of what Jean Ma calls the 'discontinuities of time as well as space; rhythms of crisis, rupture, and repetition' in the 'globalized world of late modernity' (Ma, 2010: 10).⁷ That is to say that, while the train may symbolise 'progress', embodying a sense of temporality that is linear and regimented, within the lived space-time of the family's Beijing apartment it appears in stark contrast to the extended duration of the rituals of traditional wonton cookery and the length of time and skill required to produce their leather goods (to which Liu Zaiping makes an oblique reference when lamenting his customers' attitudes towards his products). Li Zhang argues that: 'As socialist ethics, morality, and values are fading away, market forces and mass consumerism are taking a tight grip on everyday life in Chinese society' (Zhang, 2010: 127). For the family in *Oxhide* and *Oxhide II*, it is these anxieties around the loss of the 'value' of time following post-socialist China's neo-liberal turn, and the loss of dignity that goes with that, that form the centre of their own personal crisis.⁸

Sound, Duration and the 'Living Present'

Sound theorist Steven Connor notes that: 'the nature of sound is to occupy a passage rather than instant of time, duration, rather than a moment. In order to hear a sound, one must have already heard it start to decay' (Connor, 2000). The material properties of sound and the experience of listening have therefore a very specific relationship to temporality, and our sense of hearing can influence how the passing of time is perceived in lived space. Similarly, Chion contends that in audiovisual media sound 'temporalizes images', arguing that it 'vectorizes or dramatizes shots, orientating them toward a future, a goal, and creation of a feeling of imminence and expectation' (Chion, 1994: 12). Unlike more commercial sound design which uses overdubs to create complex, multilayered soundtracks, in *Oxhide* each diegetic sound, such as the snapping of the dough heard in the scene above, is given 'space' around it, which has the effect of drawing out cinematic time as the spectator is able to contemplate or 'experience' phenomenologically the auditory realm in which the narrative is unfolding (in much the same way one might perceive the 'decay' of a sound in lived space,

to use Connor's terms).⁹

As I suggested earlier, location sound recording can communicate something about the dimensions of the rooms in which the narrative is set as well as the materiality of the surfaces and objects within them, information that is not always readily given over by the image. Yet this is more than paying attention to the individual sounds of 'things', as Don Ihde notes, from a phenomenological perspective, it is important to be aware of how these sounds relate to 'the larger gestalts of auditory temporality' (Ihde, 2007: 87). In his essay 'Timeful Sound', Ihde explains that what he calls a 'phenomenology of experienced temporality' is connected to the '*temporal span* or duration of sounding that is experienced as listening'. As he writes:

I do not hear one instant followed by another; I hear an enduring gestalt within which the modulations of the melody, the speech, the noises present themselves. The instant as an atom of time is an abstraction . . . In terms of a perceptual field . . . a thing always occurs as situated within a larger unity of a field; so temporally the use of *instant* here is perceived to occur only within the larger duration of a temporal span, a living present. (Ihde, 2007: 89, emphasis in original)

The connection between duration and the sonic here is important for understanding sound's relationship to both cinematic and 'lived' space, particularly, as I have argued in this chapter, in the context of slow cinema. Thus, with all their 'modulations' of 'melody', 'speech' and 'noise', the ambient soundscapes of Liu Jiayin's masterful *Oxhide* and *Oxhide II* present a perceptual field within which the characters' 'living present' – the intimacy of the everyday – can be felt and experienced by the spectator at the same time as it is by the characters on-screen. In this chapter, I have suggested how this embodied experience of 'slow sounds' might lead to a deeper understanding of the phenomenological experience of space-time in postsocialist China, and the tensions and anxieties that surround its accelerating velocity. Furthermore, I have suggested that, through their depiction of labour, both within the narrative, and through the construction of the films themselves, *Oxhide* and *Oxhide II* offer a formal politics that reasserts compassion, care and dignity into the grand narrative of neoliberalism.

Notes

1. See Suárez's excellent essay 'Structural Film: Noise' (2008) where he makes a convincing connection between the 'long takes and defamiliarized sound' of Chantal Akerman, Gus Van Sant, Jim Jarmusch, Hou Hsiao-hsien and Tsai Ming-liang's films, their treatment of the 'enigmatic everyday', and the use of noise in structural film (p. 86).
2. The threat of obsolescence is a recurrent trope in recent Chinese cinema: for example, Ou Ning's documentary *Meishi Street* (*Mei Shi Jie*, 2006) shows the effect of the widespread demolition of housing before the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Similarly, in the section entitled 'Remnants' in *West of the Tracks*, a neighbourhood which housed former factory workers is demolished to create space for commercial businesses. See Xinyu (2010: 69).

3. See Schrader (1972).
4. See de Luca (2014: 130) for a similar discussion of the sensual sonic qualities of the films of Tsai Ming-liang.
5. This ‘private’ soundscape provides an interesting contrast with the ‘public’ nature of the soundscapes in the films of Jia Zhangke (particularly his early films, such as *Xiao Wu* [1997] and *Platform* [*Zhantai*, 2000]) in which ‘official’ voices in the form of state propaganda and ‘revolutionary’ music are frequently heard across domestic and across public spaces.
6. John Belton also makes this claim of the sound design of *A Man Escaped* (Belton, 2008: 27).
7. For example, see Yasujiro Ozu’s *Tokyo Story* (*Tôkyô monogatari*, 1953); Hou Hsiao-hsien’s *Café Lumière* (*Kôhî jikô*, 2003) and Jia Zhangke’s *Platform* and *The World* (*Shijie*, 2004) as well, of course, as *West of the Tracks*.
8. The pathos of the family’s situation is highlighted in one scene in *Oxhide* where they touch a deep scar on the leather where the cow had been branded, and empathise with the animal’s suffering. Liu makes the connection explicit when she says later that ‘the whole procedure of shooting was like uncovering a scar’ (see https://www.berlinale.de/external/de/filmarchiv/doku_pdf/20050028.pdf) [accessed 11 December 2013].
9. An interesting comparison can be made here to the use of sound in Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), a film that similarly takes place within the home but which is also a place of work.

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