

## Rustling, hammering, fluttering, yelping: Astrid Nippoldt and 'Oakwood'

By Valentina Vlastic

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*"Welcome to your home in Beijing, Oakwood Residence Beijing. The property is a modern serviced residence in Chaoyang, a growing CBD which is home to many foreign embassies, the Sanlitun shopping and entertainment area, as well as The Olympic Park, site of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics. Experience the comfort of a contemporary home at Oakwood Beijing. Oakwood Beijing offers 406 fully equipped luxury apartments ranging from studios to four bedroom penthouse and terrace apartments, all exquisitely furnished in elegant and stylish decor. Enjoy a modern lifestyle with our fitness center, health and beauty day spa, business center and beautifully landscaped private gardens. Choose to dine in your own apartment or in our Mediterranean or Chinese restaurants or enjoy our private dining service. Each apartment is fitted with a state-of-the-art air purification and air conditioning system which ensures 99.9% pure, triple filtered air, so you can trust in Oakwood and breathe easy." (Advertisement at <http://www.oakwoodasia.com/beijing/oakwood-beijing.php>)*

The worldwide-operating chain of Oakwood Residences has specialized in fulfilling the needs of an affluent stratum of the population. Its clients are mostly specialists or managers from abroad who are regularly despatched overseas by their globally operating companies for several months or even years. These expatriates regard their stays as limited in time, remaining emotionally attached to their home countries. The need to adapt to their environment does not emerge during this limited period. The Oakwood Residences serve them as domiciles befitting their social standing in the often unknown and incomprehensible surroundings.

Continuity determines quite crucially the well-being of this group of visitors who wish to be able to fulfil all their daily needs as at home. The additional measure of luxury provides solace for the loneliness of hotel suites. On the sumptuous first floors of Oakwood Towers they are in a position, according to need, to seek out high-class boutiques, wellness oases, five-star restaurants or exclusive art galleries. Their apartments are air-conditioned and — a basic requirement in Asian mega-cities — even air-filtered. The necessity of taking steps outside and perhaps getting to know foreign cultures and customs does not arise. According to the chain's intentions communicated to the outside, Oakwood Residences are sanctuaries of familiarity and Western standards.

Already the name 'Oakwood' is supposed to imply security. It stands for the oak-tree trunk with which, particularly in Germany, 'typical German virtues' such as strength, dignity and constancy are associated. The commemoration of the oak is traditionally a component of the German spirit. Its motif can be found on medals, monuments, bank-notes, coins and much else. German romantics such as Caspar David Friedrich, Carl Gustav Carus and Carl Wilhelm Kolbe ('Oak Kolbe') repeatedly chose for their paintings the motif of the oak to visualize longevity and eternity.

In the case of the Oakwood Residences, it is a matter of companies operating multilaterally that convey such associations as skilful marketing strategies. Coupled with the right ambient, balanced lighting, quiet elevator music, friendly, competent and also nice-looking staff, they are

the right stimulus to book against hard currency stays in Oakwood Tower often lasting several years.

The fact remains that the houses are simply transit zones that are frequented by affluent travelers as transitional solutions for a more or less lengthy period. As if in ivory towers, they live isolated from the rest of the populace. The social gulf is shockingly gaping. No native resident can afford to stay at an Asian Oakwood Tower. In the segregated, cocoon-like environment, familiarity and homeliness are pretended to the high-paying foreigners which have to be cared for in the background by hundreds of low-paid wage workers — concierges, porters, waiters, cleaning-staff and many more.

In the short or long run, according to Nippoldt, the privileged residents of Oakwood Tower develop an inhibition against leaving the tower. If something has to be taken care of outside the familiar sphere, this never takes place on foot, but only with the aid of the residence's own chauffeur-driven limousine. Contact with the country's people is increasingly avoided due to a hypersensitive social phobia.

If you involve yourself with being lost in foreign parts in luxuriously cultivated, but meaningless worlds, you unavoidably recall the cheerfulmelancholy film-director's work, *Lost in Translation*, by Sofia Coppola from a few years ago, in 2003. Her main characters, Bill Murray and Scarlett Johansson, play in a touching way the lack of functionality of people in foreign hotel rooms, in the elevator or in the hotel lobby. But despite the enchanting charm of the film and its actors, there are few surprises. A predictable story with a predictable plot is shown.

Astrid Nippoldt, too, engages in her HD-video, *Oakwood Garden*, from 2012 with the theme of the rich and isolated hotel industry. Her approach, however, diverges radically, not only geographically, but fundamentally. Whereas *Lost in Translation* plays in Tokyo, her cinematic work plays in Beijing. Coppola lards her story with a sequence of actors and situations; Nippoldt narrates it without main characters or without a plot at all. Her film revolves around the Beijing Oakwood Tower, but it does not show a single scene inside the tower. Its basic motif is the garden surrounding the building.

Nippoldt's film plays in the dark black night which, since time immemorial, has offered space for the primal fears of humanity, and in which visual perception is very limited. Nippoldt draws many advantages from this by displacing the film massively onto the plane of sound. Viewers, who for intervals of time become listeners, hear during the course of the film a complex rustling, hammering, fluttering, yelping and a lot more. They are completely exposed to the sense of hearing which makes them unsure and occasionally helpless and impatient since, as people with sight, they are not used to it. Nippoldt combines the sound elements alternately with slow, and then fast, edited sequences which she immerses in a dark, mysterious and diffuse, and then again in an artificial, bright, glaring neon light. All the scenes flow seamlessly into one another.

In Nippoldt's opening sequence, Oakwood Tower soars like an iconic siege-castle out of the deepest darkness. Only a few windows in the enormous skyscraper are illuminated bright yellow. The outlines of the dark tower would be indistinguishable from the dark black sky if there were no bright, white, illuminated, curved, neon sign with the name Oakwood running across the roof.

While a monotonously rattling mechanical tone runs in the background, Nippoldt's camera zooms slowly from a full view into a detail with an excellent flowing movement, which is her specialty, that generates tension. In the darkness she glides quickly over the rustling leaves of a tree and finally travels down to the entrance area on the street. Each second, film-affine viewers

expect that the camera must finally arrive at a definite destination, a kissing couple perhaps or at least a relevant object, but it does not fixate: nothing. Nippoldt's uninterruptedly roaming lens glides through short cuts irrelevantly from one motif to another, holding viewers on a constantly concentrated plane through the continued expectation. The slim legs of a female in-line skater moving into an artificially glaring light throw dancing shadows onto the street. For a few seconds, a searchlight throws a meagre light on an empty square. When it swings away, the surface disappears into the dark night. The gaze falls on a full-screen view of a wire-netting fence representing a natural barrier, and remains stuck behind it focusing on a far-off floodlight. While the detail is gliding unnoticeably downward, with the picture becoming blurred, an electronic beat starts up that Nippoldt has artificially added to the background noises. Not dissimilar to a beating pulse, it spreads itself quietly, but nevertheless latently, over the rest of the sound such as the growling of a dog or the remote street noise of the metropolis of Beijing. The beat that is to be heard for the next few minutes makes the film modern and attractive. After a while it combines with a presumably Chinese-speaking female voice that wants to calm down a jarringly yelping dog. Spiky shoots of a pine-tree suddenly move through the image. Mosquitoes fly into the artificial light.

Nippoldt films without a tripod. The natural movement of her hand resulting from the up and down of her slowly moving body is expressed in the slightly swaying image. The degree of focus of her motifs changes continually. Their colourful aperture-spots — reflections or diffusions from filming against the light — appear in the camera's lens or as reflections from a car roof, resulting sometimes in fascinating abstract image-compositions. Focused once again, they light up as lights, plants, fences or sprinklers. The irrigation systems turn on automatically in the night to water the plants growing around Oakwood Tower. The hissing noise of the water being sprayed around mingles with the monotonous sing-song of the surroundings. In the midst of the noisy city of Beijing, the saturated exotic garden becomes an oasis of calm and naturalness underscoring the exclusive ambience of the upper-class residence. Around the garden there is a high fence. As in the pleasure gardens of the late Middle Ages or Renaissance, the Oakwood garden is reserved for those of a higher station. In the second half of the film, however, the garden switches to something artificial and unnatural. Glaring UV light causes the plants to radiate fluorescent tones, also making them yellow, pink, green or blue. Nippoldt complements the abnormal impression with the hectic fluttering of a moth that you never see, but which seems so near that you want to shoo away the annoying insect any moment. Sometime or other the noise disappears and is replaced seamlessly by the guttural croaking of a pair of frogs wanting to mate. The tones are always enveloped by the background noises of the city composed of traffic noise, mechanical banging and far-off rumbling. The penultimate sequence takes place on a brightly lit tennis court on which people can be heard, but not seen. The last scene before the finish turns black shows a limousine driving up to the entrance of Oakwood Tower. But no one gets out. The imaginary tour is over; the next visitor, so you think, in a few moments will reach or leave the alien transit zone.

They are always moodful, but reserved scenes that Nippoldt presents to us. On her ramble through the night there are no actors. Here and there, like ghosts, there are sketchy outlines to be seen or murmuring voices to be heard. Her camera gaze is restless. Her path seems to be without any recognizable aim, but without let-up is oriented toward the artificial illumination in the garden. The real sounds are mixed with artificial ones.

Nippoldt immerses her world in the blackness of night which, however, never seems without solace or lost, but rather exotic and attractive. There are elements of pop culture which she mixes in to make her world attractive, such as the female in-line skater, or the electronic beat, or the hallucinatory bright colours of the plants. And it is the restlessness, the tirelessness of her gaze that evoke fascination.

Astrid Nippoldt shows us a drastic contrast in her 2012 video work, *My Day*. In it a single camera position is the complete basic motif of the almost four-and-a-half-minute long film: the view from a window. In contrast to *Oakwood Garden*, viewers have now finally entered the interior of the skyscraper. But they don't get to see it anew. All that Nippoldt presents is the desolate view of the surroundings from the classy tower by day, which suddenly seems like a rough multi-storey residential complex for the lower classes. It is the frame for a narrative that is done exclusively by employing superimposed horizontal statements. The brief news-lines run over the screen like some kind of tele-prompter. The first message is, "*My typical day is waking up at 5:30 in the morning*". The story is told from the viewpoint of the partner of an expatriate who has travelled together with his partner out of love and has no function whatsoever in this foreign place. *My Day* is dedicated to his everyday melancholy and the resulting isolation. The film is made from the perspective of a presumably male narrator. He sketches his daily routine: getting up, making breakfast, reading the newspaper, playing video games, doing sport at the fitness centre. Now and again washing has to be washed or shopping has to be done. All these matters, as we know, can be settled within the walls of the Oakwood Residence. In the afternoons he tries to be creative by drawing and painting. Out of a deficit of inspiration, however, he quickly switches back to the video games. At five in the afternoon he starts cooking dinner for his wife and himself. It's already on the table when she returns home to him. And then life again has meaning. "*And from the time she gets home it's just us relaxing.*" But their time together is short, until the next day. "*Until I have to do it all over again.*" The partner does not complain about the state of affairs, however. "*It's nice living here.*" No matter how lacking in solace Nippoldt's view from the window is, she nevertheless stages it poetically. On the left and right, the soaring, alternately reddish or yellow, skyscrapers frame the image. The lower half is defined by smaller buildings. The upper half shows a dark-grey, overcast, but cloudless sky. A break-out from the monotony is marked by the black electricity cables running vertically that divide the image into a left and right half. As with the Golden Ratio, the parts have an harmonious proportional relationship.

In the first half of the film, Nippoldt zooms in but then quickly returns to the original view. Afterwards the picture is frozen once again. A slight movement is provided by the electricity cables' swaying in the wind. In the afternoons the curtains are suddenly drawn. Through the thin fabric, but also through a broad slit in the middle, they let in enough light for the room. Their function is to block the view from the outside. The isolation is oppressive and baneful. The buildings outside can be perceived only like a grey veil which in truth has long since laid itself over the resident's psyche.

Astrid Nippoldt is "one of the most interesting figures in the video scene because she wonderfully eludes any categorization", writes Wulf Herzogenrath, a German art historian and proven expert on video art. In Nippoldt's films there are elements of pop culture, erotic culture, social studies and film noir. To reduce her to some genre or other, however, would be fundamentally a mistake. It is her way of looking that makes her unmistakable, with which possibly you could categorize her. In a certain way composedly, but nevertheless sensitively, she shows in her works

documentations of her environment. She catches reality without polishing it or making it coarse. She always leaves the viewers room for interpretations and sympathy or antipathy. Her films emerge already in the mind before she begins filming. Determining the choice of perspective continually defines the course of each film. Nevertheless, she incorporates into her works also spontaneous dialogues that come about with what occurs at the moment of shooting. Whereas in *Oakwood Garden* she roams through the night like a thief with a camera, making darkness into a theme and showing artificial, neon-yellow worlds, it is the frozen view without solace out of the window in *My Day* that generates a shattering.

For her films she doesn't need much, just sound, image and time. She mixes these three components into a promising conglomerate that becomes an unmistakable story through the right proportions.

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