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# Structural transformations driven by local disorder at interfaces

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# Abstract

Despite the fundamental importance of solid–solid transformations in many technologies, the microscopic mechanisms remain poorly understood. Here, we explore the atomistic mechanisms at the migrating interface during solid-solid phase transformations between the topologically closed-packed A15 and body-centred cubic phase in tungsten. The high energy barriers and slow dynamics associated with this transformation require the application of enhanced molecular sampling approaches. To this end, we performed metadynamics simulations in combination with a path collective variable derived from a machine learning classification of local structural environments, which allows the system to freely sample the complex interface structure. A disordered region of varying width forming at the migrating interface is identified as a key physical descriptor of the transformation mechanisms, facilitating the atomic shuffling and rearrangement necessary for structural transformations. Furthermore, this can directly be linked to the differences in interface mobility for distinct orientation relationships as well as the formation of interfacial ledges during the migration along low-mobility directions.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Solid-solid phase transformations are ubiquitous in nature [1], and are of particular significance in the realm of materials science, where they have practical implications in metallurgy [2], ceramics [3], and colloidal matter [4], among others. These transformations are primarily governed by the nucleation and growth of new phases at internal interfaces, where structural transformations are continuously driven by the migration of the interface. Over the years, there have been numerous experimental and computational studies focusing on structural transformations at grain [5–16] and phase boundaries [17–35] in metals and alloys. Still, the microscopic processes associated with interface migration remain, to a large extent, poorly understood due to limitations in accessible timescales and the complexity of the microscopic dynamics.

Internal interfaces are intrinsic planar defects between distinct phases directly linking the parent and product phase in solid-solid transformations [36]. The properties of these interfaces hold a vital role in the phase transformation kinetics and mechanisms, impacting

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the microstructural evolution and thereby shaping the mechanical or functional properties of materials. Since interface migration often involves atomic shuffling and rearrangement, interface velocities are markedly influenced by various interface characteristics, including lattice mismatch, orientation relationship, density, impurity contents, and so on. Indeed, experimental studies of colloidal systems evidence that interface velocities strongly depend on the interface structure, resulting in largely different velocities for distinct orientation relationships [37, 38]. More specifically, a strong correlation was found between interface coherency and mobility, with incoherent interfaces migrating much faster than semicoherent and coherent interfaces. At incoherent interfaces, disordered interface layers play a prominent role in facilitating the rearrangement of particles at the interface, thereby enhancing its mobility [37, 38]. Similarly, the formation of intermediate amorphous phases enabling solid-solid transformations has been reported in perovskites [39, 40] and metals [41–44], but little is known for systems including more complex crystallographic phases.

In the present study, we focus on the importance of disordered interface regions during structural transformations between the complex topological-closed-packed (TCP) [45–48] A15 and body-centred cubic (bcc) phase in tungsten. In recent years, these two phases have gained significant attention due to their relevance in practical applications, where bcc-W with its high melting temperature and relatively short electron mean free path is a promising candidate for microelectronics [49, 50], while A15-W exhibits a giant spin Hall effect [51] desired in spintronic devices. The presence of both bcc-W and A15-W is often reported in W thin-films [51–58] exhibiting different orientational geometries with semicoherent or incoherent interfaces [54, 56, 58], most notably with (210), (200), and (110) planes. To investigate the atomic-scale processes and find the relevant physical descriptors during structural transformations at these heterophase interfaces with distinct orientation relationships, we perform extensive enhanced sampling simulations following the moving interface over extended timescales. A particular challenge is the accurate characterization and meaningful representation of the inherently complex A15 phase as well as the bcc-A15 interface. Here, we combine the enhanced sampling with a machine-learning based classification of local structural environments. Following the approach of Rogal *et al.* [59], we describe the phase transformation as a path in the global classifier space [59, 60] of A15-W and bcc-W, and combine the resulting path collective variable with metadynamics [61, 62] to drive the transformation between different structures. Similar to the findings in colloids [37, 38, 63],

pervoskites [39, 40], and metals [41–44], a disordered region is formed at the moving interface. This disordered interface region constitutes a key physical descriptor of the transformation mechanism that determines the change in interface mobility for different orientation relationships. Furthermore, our enhanced sampling simulations reveal the formation of interfacial ledges resulting from the intrinsic difference in interface mobilities along different directions that is not captured by straightforward high-temperature molecular dynamics simulations. This study takes a step forward in deepening our understanding of phase transformations between A15 and bcc phases by identifying key microscopic descriptors that could be used to guide and interpret future experiments, towards the design of materials with targeted properties.

## II. COMPUTATIONAL APPROACH

### A. Machine learning classification of local structural environments

Characterizing local structural environments [64–66] is an essential first step when investigating interface migration processes. In our study, we apply a classification neural network (NN) based on Geiger and Dellago’s work [67], that has been demonstrated to provide accurate structural fingerprints for amorphous and complex crystalline phases in water [67] and metallic systems [59]. We adapt the same NN architecture as in our previous work [59], with 14 features in the input layer, two hidden layers with 25 nodes each, and an output layer with five different classes. The input features comprise 11 Behler-Parrinello symmetry functions [64, 68] and three Steinhardt bond order parameters [69, 70]. Details of these descriptors are given in the supplementary information. The output layer of the NN provides a vector  $\mathbf{y}_i$  that measures the similarity of local structural environments of atom  $i$  with the phase of interest  $j$  with  $y_i^j \in [0, 1]$ . A value close to 1 indicates a large similarity to the target phase. Here, the five considered classes include crystalline bcc, A15, fcc, hcp, and an amorphous/disordered phase.

For our study of the W system, we do not need to train a new classification NN but can utilize the network that was originally trained for Mo [59]. The dataset for Mo included local environments of all relevant crystalline bulk phases, amorphous phases, and interface configurations at various temperatures and pressures. Since interatomic distances in Mo

and W are quite similar, with lattice constants  $a_0(\text{Mo}) \approx 3.15 \text{ \AA}$  and  $a_0(\text{W}) \approx 3.17 \text{ \AA}$ , respectively, the classification network showed excellent transferability and accuracy when applied to our dataset for the various phases in W. Additional details can be found in the supplementary information.

## B. Path collective variable in classifier space

Based on the information about the local structural environment of each atom  $i$ ,  $y_i^j$ , we define global classifiers that effectively measure the respective phase fractions in a given configuration,

$$Y^j = \frac{1}{N} \sum_i^N y_i^j \quad , \quad (1)$$

where  $N$  denotes the total number of atoms. For each configuration, we compute five phase fractions,  $Y^{\text{bcc}}$ ,  $Y^{\text{A15}}$ ,  $Y^{\text{fcc}}$ ,  $Y^{\text{hcp}}$ , and  $Y^{\text{dis}}$ , where ‘dis’ stands for disordered/amorphous phase, respectively. Using the global classifiers of the considered phases separately, for example using only  $Y^{\text{bcc}}$  as a one-dimensional collective variable (CV) in the enhanced sampling, is insufficient to drive the phase transformation between bcc and A15, since decreasing  $Y^{\text{bcc}}$  does not promote the growth of A15. Furthermore, if both  $Y^{\text{bcc}}$  and  $Y^{\text{A15}}$  are used as separate CVs in 2D enhanced sampling, the simulations do not converge due to the mutual dependence of these CVs: as  $Y^{\text{bcc}}$  increases,  $Y^{\text{A15}}$  needs to decrease and vice versa. Instead, the global classifiers are combined in a non-linear way by defining a path collective variable [71] in the space of global classifiers [59, 60]. Since we are interested in the structural transformation between the A15 and bcc phase, we construct a linear path in the  $Y^{\text{bcc}} - Y^{\text{A15}}$  space, keeping the sum of the two phase fraction constant (red line in Fig. 1(a)). The corresponding path CV is given by

$$f(\mathbf{Y}(\mathbf{r})) = \frac{1}{K-1} \frac{\sum_{k=1}^K (k-1) \exp[-\lambda |\mathbf{Y}(\mathbf{r}) - \mathbf{Y}_k|^2]}{\sum_{k=1}^K \exp[-\lambda |\mathbf{Y}(\mathbf{r}) - \mathbf{Y}_k|^2]} \quad , \quad (2)$$

where  $\mathbf{Y}(\mathbf{r}) = \{Y^{\text{bcc}}, Y^{\text{A15}}\}$  represents the position of a configuration  $\mathbf{r}$  in the  $Y^{\text{bcc}}-Y^{\text{A15}}$  space,  $\mathbf{Y}_k$  are the  $K$  points,  $k : \{1, \dots, K\}$ , defining the path, and  $|\mathbf{Y}(\mathbf{r}) - \mathbf{Y}_k|^2$  marks the squared distance of a configuration from a point  $k$  in the  $Y^{\text{bcc}} - Y^{\text{A15}}$  space. The parameter  $\lambda$  is derived from the inverse of the distance between subsequent points along the path. The value of the path CV, shown in Fig. 1(a), increases smoothly from 0 to 1 along the path and

is constant perpendicular to the path. When the path CV is used in enhanced sampling, the system is pushed along the path while it can explore all degrees of freedom normal to the path. In addition to the path CV in Eq. (2), a function  $z(\mathbf{Y}(\mathbf{r}))$ , shown in Fig. 1(b), can be defined measuring the distance from the path in the  $Y^{\text{bcc}}\text{-}Y^{\text{A15}}$  space, thus forming a tube around the path [71]

$$z(\mathbf{Y}(\mathbf{r})) = -\frac{1}{\lambda} \ln \left( \sum_{k=1}^K \exp [-\lambda (\mathbf{Y}(\mathbf{r}) - \mathbf{Y}_k)^2] \right) . \quad (3)$$

This distance function can be used as an additional CV in enhanced sampling or as a restraint on the sampling of  $f(\mathbf{Y}(\mathbf{r}))$ . Utilizing  $z(\mathbf{Y}(\mathbf{r}))$  together with  $f(\mathbf{Y}(\mathbf{r}))$  as CVs is efficient if the proposed path is not a suitable sampling coordinate and an exploration of phase space away from the predefined path is needed. Conversely, if  $z(\mathbf{Y}(\mathbf{r}))$  is used to add a restraining potential to  $f(\mathbf{Y}(\mathbf{r}))$ , it imposes sampling close to the proposed path [72] and limits the sampling of configuration space orthogonal to the path. In this work, we utilized the distance function in a restraining potential to sample the configuration space deviating only little from the predefined path in the  $Y^{\text{bcc}}\text{-}Y^{\text{A15}}$  space. The restraining potential [72] takes the form

$$V^{\text{res}}(z(\mathbf{Y}(\mathbf{r}))) = \kappa \left( \frac{z(\mathbf{Y}(\mathbf{r})) - z_0}{\epsilon} \right)^n , \quad (4)$$

where  $z_0$  sets the center from which the distance is measured,  $n$  is the exponent number,  $\kappa$  is the prefactor, and  $\epsilon$  defines the width of the restraining potential.

### C. Metadynamics

To drive the phase transformation between A15 and bcc and sample the corresponding free energy profiles, we use metadynamics together with the path CV defined in section II B. In metadynamics [61, 62], the exploration of the phase space is accelerated by adding a time-dependent bias potential along a predefined CV. Here, we only summarize the essential equations of metadynamics combined with the path CV and refer to the original papers and reviews [61, 62, 73–76] for more details on the methodology. The time-dependent bias potential deposited along the path CV is given by a sum of Gaussians

$$V_{\text{bias}}(s, t) = h \sum_{t_i=\tau_G, 2\tau_G, \dots}^{t_i < t} \exp \left( -\frac{(S(t_i) - s)^2}{2\sigma^2} \right) , \quad (5)$$

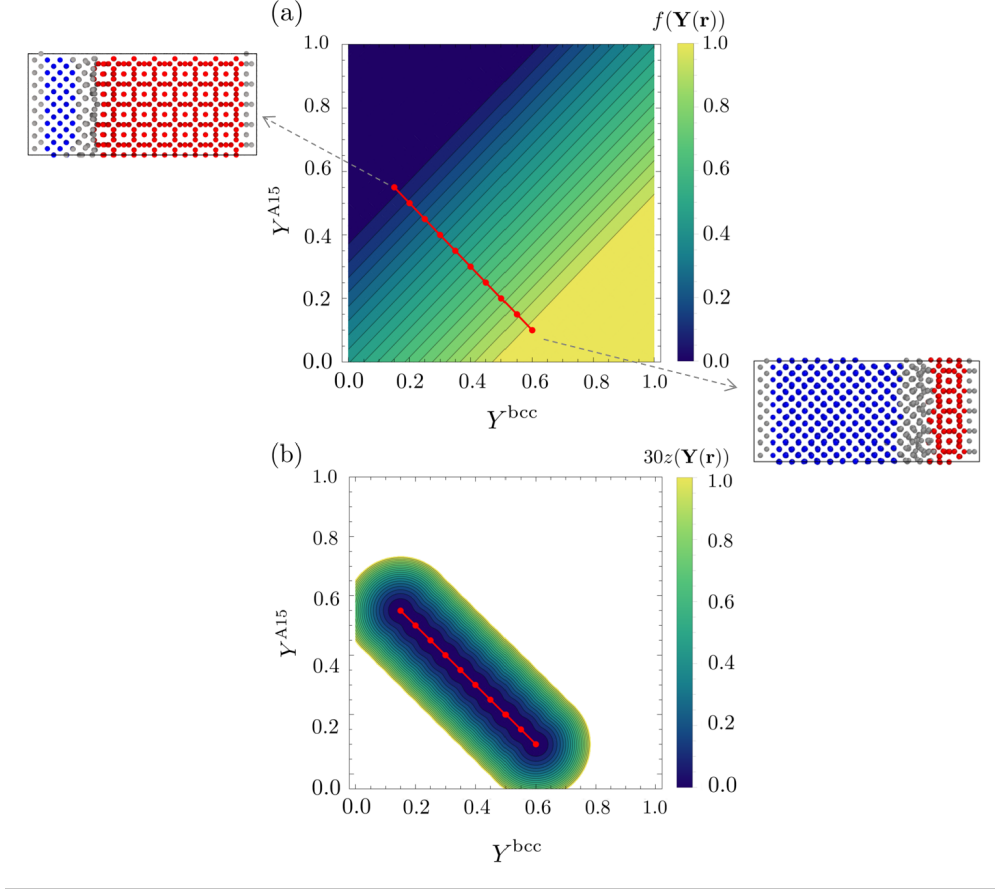


FIG. 1: Illustration of (a) the path collective variable  $f(\mathbf{Y}(\mathbf{r}))$  and (b) the distance function  $z(\mathbf{Y}(\mathbf{r}))$  (multiplied by 30) together with the path (red line) in the  $Y^{\text{bcc}}\text{-}Y^{\text{A15}}$  space. There are 10 equidistant points along the path, starting at  $\mathbf{Y}_1 = \{Y^{\text{bcc}} : 0.15, Y^{\text{A15}} : 0.55\}$  and ending at  $\mathbf{Y}_{10} = \{Y^{\text{bcc}} : 0.60, Y^{\text{A15}} : 0.10\}$ . Representative configurations are shown for the two end points of the path. In these configurations, bcc atoms are shown in blue, A15 in red, and disorder in gray.

where  $h$  and  $\sigma$  are the height and width of the Gaussians, respectively.  $S(t_i) = f(\mathbf{Y}(\mathbf{r}(t_i)))$  represents the value of the path CV at time  $t_i$ . The free energy profile along  $s$  is approximated by the negative of the accumulated bias with

$$F(s) = - \lim_{t \rightarrow \infty} V_{\text{bias}}(s, t) + \text{const} \quad . \quad (6)$$

Metadynamics can be used to sample the transformation close to the proposed path by adding the restraining potential on the distance function, Eq. (4). The unbiased free energy  $F(s)$  can be derived from the simulations employing a restraining potential by [72]

$$F(s) = F_r(s) - k_B T \ln \langle e^{\beta V^{\text{res}}(z)} \rangle_{r,s} \quad , \quad (7)$$



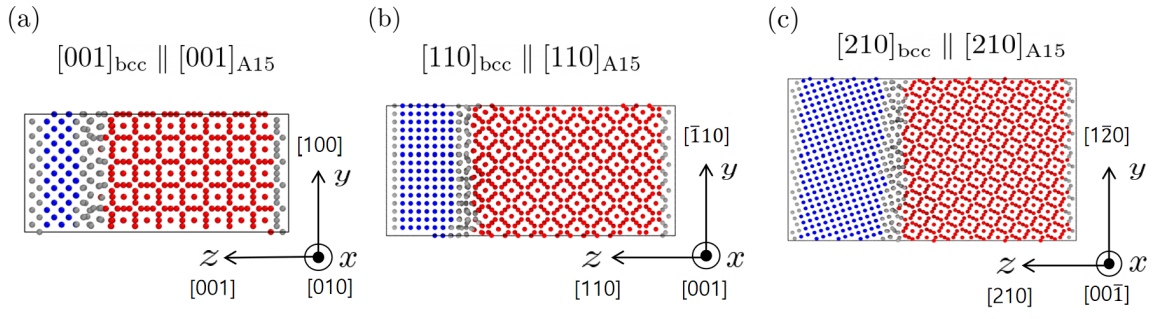


FIG. 2: Illustration of supercells with interfaces for different orientation relationships. (a)  $[001]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [001]_{\text{A15}}$ , (b)  $[110]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [110]_{\text{A15}}$ , and (c)  $[210]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [210]_{\text{A15}}$ . Gray atoms represent the interface, where the left- and right-end gray atoms are fixed so that only one interface (the middle one) is mobile in simulations. A15 is colored in red and bcc in blue.

where  $F_r(s)$  is the free energy in the restrained system,  $k_B$  is the Boltzmann constant, and  $\langle \dots \rangle$  denotes the ensemble average.

#### D. Computational details

Semicoherent interfaces between bcc-W and A15-W are constructed by matching different numbers of A15 and bcc unit cells in the interface plane. By pairing both phases along the  $[001]$ ,  $[110]$ , and  $[210]$  direction normal to the interface, we obtain supercells of three distinct orientations relevant to the experimental observations in W-thin films,  $[001]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [001]_{\text{A15}}$ ,  $[110]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [110]_{\text{A15}}$ , and  $[210]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [210]_{\text{A15}}$ . The dimensions of the supercells parallel to the interface are optimized for the bcc lattice constant ( $T = 0$  K), with 128 atoms in a bcc layer, resulting in a slight compression of 0.57% of A15. The initial setup of the interfaces is optimized by relaxing atomic positions in  $xyz$  and cell dimensions in  $z$  direction normal to the interface. Periodic boundary conditions are applied in all dimensions. To track the motion of a single interface, the atoms in one of the two interfaces in the supercell are kept fixed. Supercells of various orientations are visualized in Fig. 2 with more details provided in Tab. I.

The LAMMPS package [77] is used for molecular dynamics (MD) simulations. To describe the interactions between W atoms, we use an embedded atom method (EAM) potential [78], which has been shown to provide an accurate description of the fundamental properties of W.

TABLE I: Supercells with different orientation relationships with bcc and A15 paired along  $z$  direction. The corresponding atomic configurations are shown in Fig. 2. All three systems have 128 atoms in a bcc layer and same mismatches between bcc and A15, resulting in a 0.57% compression of A15. The A15 phase has two planar densities as it has two inequivalent sublattices that are 12- and 14-fold coordinated resulting in two types of layers.

Paired orientation	Cell length (Å) $L_x \times L_y \times L_z$	$N_{\text{unit cell}}$ in		$N_{\text{atoms}}$	Planar densities (atom/nm <sup>2</sup> )		
		$x \times y$ direction			bcc	A15	A15
		bcc	A15				
$[001]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [001]_{\text{A15}}$	$25.34 \times 50.69 \times 57.11$	$8 \times 16$	$5 \times 10$	4352	9.96	11.68	3.89
$[110]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [110]_{\text{A15}}$	$35.84 \times 25.34 \times 79.92$	$8 \times 8$	$5 \times 5$	4302	14.09	11.01	5.50
$[210]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [210]_{\text{A15}}$	$56.67 \times 50.69 \times 96.62$	$8 \times 16$	$5 \times 10$	15966	4.46	6.96	3.48

All MD simulations are performed in the canonical ensemble ( $NVT$ ) using a Nosé-Hoover thermostat [79–81] with an integration time step of  $\Delta t = 2$  fs. The damping parameter of the thermostat is well tested and set to 0.1 ps to ensure the temperature fluctuations are appropriate. Before every simulation, the system is thermally equilibrated for  $t_{\text{eq}} = 1$  ns.

In the MD simulations of interface migration at elevated temperatures, the formation time of a bcc layer  $\tau_{\text{bcc}}$  is recorded in each run. By monitoring the bcc layer adjacent to the migrating interface and tracking the formation of a new bcc layer, the interface velocity is calculated as  $v = d_{(hkl)}/\tau_{\text{bcc}}$ , where  $d_{(hkl)}$  is the inter-plane distance normal to the interface. An average velocity is computed from a minimum of 100 values at each temperature. The formation rate of bcc layers relates to the formation time by  $k = 1/\bar{\tau}_{\text{bcc}}$ . An apparent activation energy can then be derived from the Arrhenius relationship between transformation rate and temperature via  $k = A \exp\left(-\frac{E^{\text{act}}}{k_B T}\right)$ , where  $A$  is a prefactor.

Metadynamics simulations are performed with an in-house developed *fix* package that is added to the LAMMPS [77] code. For the  $[110]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [110]_{\text{A15}}$  system, we employed the system size listed in Tab. I, while for  $[001]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [001]_{\text{A15}}$ , we used a smaller simulation cell with  $N = 2176$  atoms consisting of an  $8 \times 8$  bcc unit cells paired with  $5 \times 5$  A15 unit cells along the  $x$  and  $y$  directions. All metadynamics parameters have been well-tuned for

each run. The bias potential is deposited with a frequency of  $\nu = 0.4$  ps. The width of the deposited Gaussians is set to  $\sigma = 2 \times 10^{-3}$  for the  $[001]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [001]_{\text{A15}}$  and  $\sigma = 1 \times 10^{-3}$  for the  $[110]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [110]_{\text{A15}}$  system. In the sampling of the  $\text{A15} \rightarrow \text{bcc}$  transformation, the height of the Gaussians is  $h = 10^{-3}$  eV for  $[001]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [001]_{\text{A15}}$  and  $h = 4 \times 10^{-3}$  eV for  $[110]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [110]_{\text{A15}}$ . In order to sample both transformation directions  $\text{A15} \leftrightarrow \text{bcc}$ , the height of the Gaussians needed to be increased to  $h = 10^{-2}$  eV due to the large energy difference between the two phases. All metadynamics simulations are performed at  $T = 1300$  K. The deposited bias potential was recorded on a grid with 1401 points for  $s \in [-0.2, 1.2]$  in all runs.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### A. Importance of disorder during interface migration

To explore the interface migration process between A15 and bcc in the  $[001]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [001]_{\text{A15}}$  orientation, we perform metadynamics simulations sampling the  $\text{A15} \rightarrow \text{bcc}$  transformation along the path CV shown in Fig. 1(a) in the  $Y^{\text{bcc}}-Y^{\text{A15}}$  space. The path consists of ten equidistant nodes between the two endpoints at  $\{Y^{\text{bcc}} : 0.15, Y^{\text{A15}} : 0.55\}$  and  $\{Y^{\text{bcc}} : 0.60, Y^{\text{A15}} : 0.10\}$ . Metadynamics runs are terminated when the value of the path CV reaches  $s = 1$ , just before recrossing, when a single one-way  $\text{A15} \rightarrow \text{bcc}$  transformation is fully sampled, and the accumulated bias potential is recorded at this point. As discussed below, a continued sampling of both the  $\text{A15} \rightarrow \text{bcc}$  and  $\text{bcc} \rightarrow \text{A15}$  transformations requires the addition of a restraining potential. In this initial sampling, we focus on the  $\text{A15} \rightarrow \text{bcc}$  transformation only allowing us to analyse the atomistic mechanisms without any restrains. In total, 60 independent metadynamics runs were performed.

In all runs, a complete  $\text{A15} \rightarrow \text{bcc}$  transformations is captured within 70 ns, showing a stepwise decrease in A15 and corresponding increase in bcc which indicates a layer-by-layer growth (see Supplementary Fig. S1). In addition, there is a noticeable amount of disorder at the migrating interface. The average path density in the  $Y^{\text{bcc}}-Y^{\text{A15}}$  space extracted from the metadynamics runs is shown in Fig. 3(a). Since there is no restraining potential enforcing the  $\text{A15} \rightarrow \text{bcc}$  transformation to closely follow the predefined path in the  $Y^{\text{bcc}}-Y^{\text{A15}}$  space, the system is free to explore a wide range of interface configurations that correspond to the same value of the path CV perpendicular to the path. Indeed, the average path

density deviates from the predefined linear path and follows a zig-zag pattern, where high density regions are coloured in blue/green and low density regions in yellow in Fig. 3(a). The highest path density regions correspond to the five energy minima in the average free energy profile shown in Fig. 3(b), and the lowest density regions to the transition states. The zig-zag pattern indicates a gradual decrease in the amount of crystalline bcc and A15 and corresponding increase in disorder as the system moves away from the linear path, followed by a transition restoring the amount of crystalline phases but with changed relative phase fractions. Correspondingly, each minimum in the free energy profile represents configurations with complete layers of the two crystalline phases along the [001] direction. As the interface migrates, moving the system from one free energy minimum to the next, an energy barrier of approximately  $1.7 \pm 0.6$  eV needs to be overcome. The barrier is in agreement with the activation energy of the A15→bcc transformation in W thin films extracted from high-temperature MD simulations ( $\Delta E = 1.7$  eV) and differential scanning calorimetry measurements ( $\Delta E = 2.2 \pm 0.1$  eV) [57]. In this study, the mechanism underlying the transformation was described as collective movements of W atoms within a disordered interface layer [57]. Indeed, our results similarly show that the disordered region at the interface is closely associated with the transformation mechanism and free energy profile. This interface region between A15 and bcc spans 4–6 layers along [001] with a width of 4–7 Å. Within the current supercell, this corresponds to approximately 28-33% disorder including a constant contribution from the second, fixed interface. As shown in Fig. 3(c), the average amount of disorder at the interface strongly correlates with the free energy profile. The minima and maxima in the amount of disorder are located at the same positions as the free energy minima and saddles. At the free energy minima, the system exhibits the least amount of disorder at the interface with well-defined crystalline layers, see configurations A and C in Fig 3(d). As the interface migrates, disorder increases, where a 5% increase corresponds to an expansion of the interface region by approximately 3 Å in the [001] direction. As the width of the disordered region increases (configuration B in Fig 3(d)), it enables more flexibility in atomic shuffling and structural rearrangement to facilitate structural transformations. The growth of the disordered interface region dissolves antecedent A15 layers, facilitating barrier crossings, followed by the formation of bcc layers along [001]. Moving from one free energy minimum to the next, approximately four layers of A15 are transformed into bcc through the migration of a disordered interface with varying thickness.

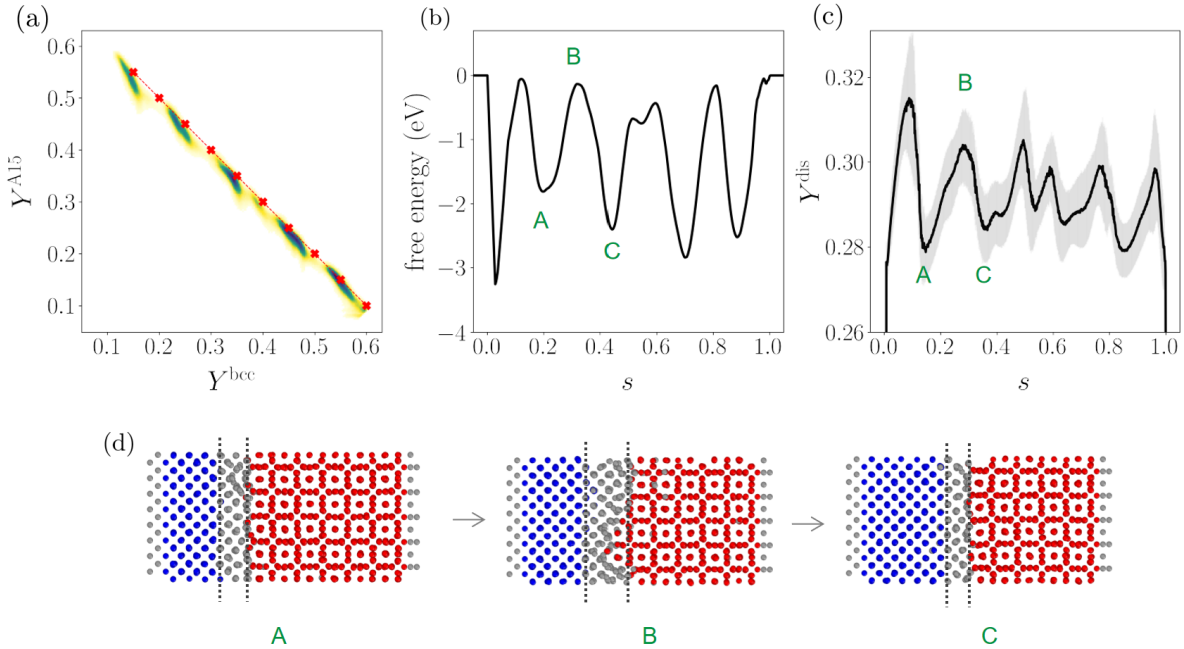


FIG. 3: (a) Average path density in the  $Y^{\text{bcc}}-Y^{\text{A15}}$  space together with the predefined path (red). The color gradient corresponds to an increase in density from light to dark. (b) Average free energy profile along the path collective variable. (c) Average amount of disordered interface projected on the path collective variable. The shaded area indicates the standard deviation in  $Y^{\text{dis}}$ . (d) Representative configurations at energy minima A and C, and transition state B. A15 phase is colored in red, bcc in blue, and disorder in gray, respectively. The dashed lines mark the boundary of the disordered interface between A15 and bcc. When the system is in the free energy minima, it has well defined crystalline layers with minimum amount of disorder at the interface; at the transition state, the width of the disordered region increases to facilitate the migration. From A to C, approximately 4 layers of A15 are transformed into bcc along the  $[001]$  direction.

The average free energy profile depicted in Fig 3(b) only reflects the one-way transformation from A15 to bcc, but does not resemble the complete free energy profile since the reverse  $\text{bcc} \rightarrow \text{A15}$  transformation has not been sampled. To be able to sample the transformation in both directions,  $\text{A15} \leftrightarrow \text{bcc}$ , and obtain a converged estimate of the complete free energy profile, we need to apply a tight restraining potential on the distance function of the path, Eq. (4). This enforces the transformations to proceed closely along the predefined path in the  $Y^{\text{bcc}}-Y^{\text{A15}}$  space and avoids that the system is being pushed into unphysical

high-energy regions of configuration space. The parameters of the restraining potential are set to  $\kappa = 30$  eV,  $n = 2$ ,  $\epsilon = 0.05$ , and  $z_0 = 0$ . We perform metadynamics simulations with two different paths: (i) the linear path also used in the unrestrained simulations; (ii) a *bumpy* path following the average path density in the unrestrained A15 $\rightarrow$ bcc transformations in Fig. 3(a). A detailed description and an illustration of the predefined bumpy path are given in the supplementary information (see Fig. S2). The average path densities extracted from simulations along the linear and bumpy path are shown in Figs. 4(a) and (b), respectively. In both cases, the trajectories sampling the A15 $\leftrightarrow$ bcc transformations follow the predefined path with little deviation. In comparison to the fast sampling of A15 $\rightarrow$ bcc transformations within 70 ns, it takes  $t = 320$  ns to sample the first bcc $\rightarrow$ A15 transformation for the linear path, and  $t = 240$  ns for the bumpy path. We extend the sampling of the continued A15 $\leftrightarrow$ bcc transformation to  $t = 781$  ns for the linear path and  $t = 1554$  ns for the bumpy path to extract converged free energy profiles from the metadynamics simulations shown in Figs. 4(c) and (d). In both cases, we obtained minimal hysteresis in the path CV during recrossing in metadynamics and a well-defined free energy profiles, demonstrating that the selected path CV provides a good description of structural transformations (see also supplemental Fig. S3). The relative fast A15 $\rightarrow$ bcc transformation but extremely slow bcc $\rightarrow$ A15 transformation is due to the energy difference between the two phases. The lattice mismatch in the current cell geometry compresses A15 by 0.57% (see section IID), which leads to an energy gain and decrease in pressure when growing bcc, whereas the formation of A15 leads to an increase in pressure and energy. Consequently, the free energy profile associated with the A15 $\leftrightarrow$ bcc transformation exhibits substantial asymmetry spanning a range of 92 eV for both the linear and bumpy path, which reflects the lower free energy of bcc compared to A15. In order to efficiently explore the vastly asymmetric free energy landscapes, the height of the deposited Gaussians in the bias potential had to be increased by a factor of 10 compared to the unrestraint simulations. This may reduce the resolution of the free energy profiles, in particular around the transition states. However, in our study, the convergence of the metadynamics simulations indicates that the accuracy of the computed free energy profiles is sufficient. By employing refinements in the sampling, such as well-tempered metadynamics [74–76], the estimate of the free energy barriers could be improved further.

While the overall energy scale is comparable for both path CVs, the details of free energy

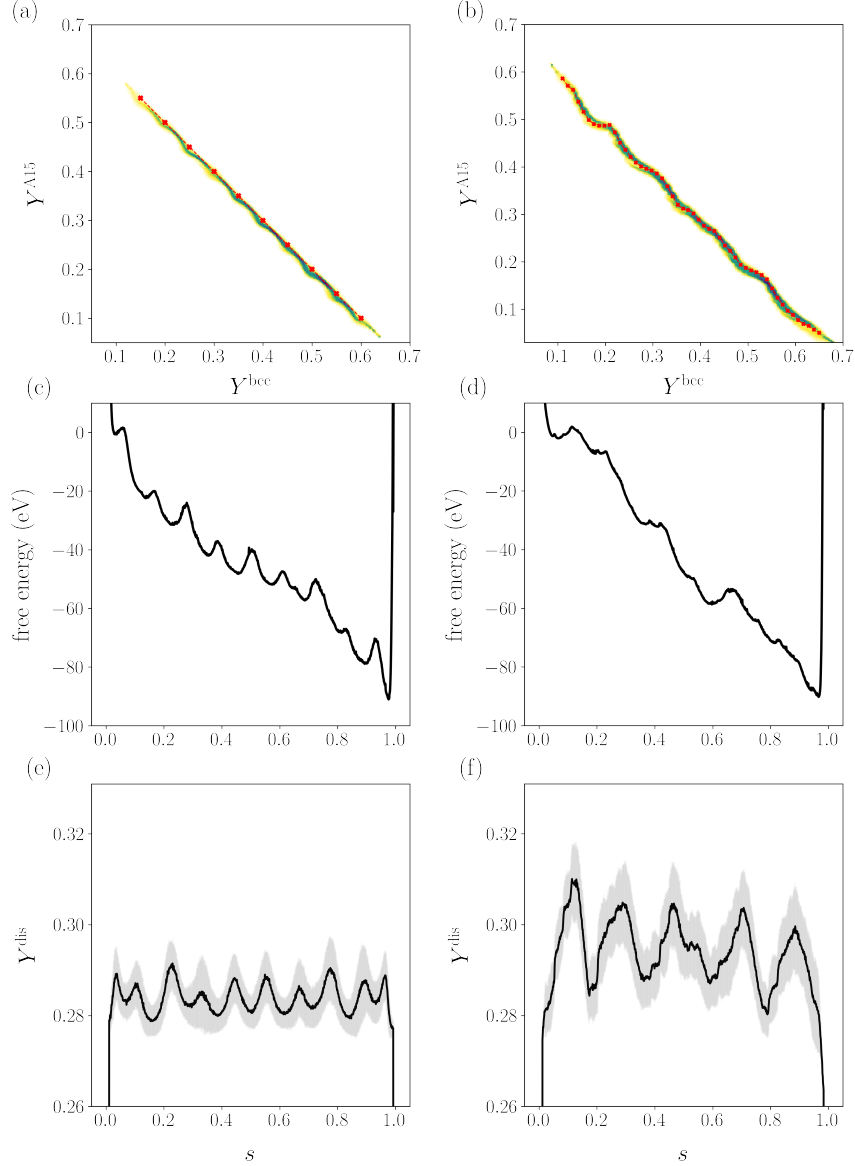


FIG. 4: Average path density with the predefined (a) linear and (b) bumpy path (red) in the  $Y^{bcc}$ - $Y^{Al5}$  space. (c) and (d) Free energy profiles along the path collective variable for the (c) linear path after  $t = 781$  ns and (d) the bumpy path after  $t = 1554$  ns. The average amount of disorder along the path collective variable is shown for the (e) linear and (f) bumpy path.

profiles along the linear and bumpy path are notably different. In particular, for the transformation along the linear path, the free energy profile shows ten energy minima, whereas for the profile along the bumpy path, there are approximately five. The differences in the free energy profiles are attributed to a change in the transformation mechanism. Specifically, as

shown in Figs. 4(e) and (f), the amount of disorder observed during the structural transformation differs for the two paths. For the bumpy path, as it follows the path density of the unrestrained A15→bcc transformation, the width of the disordered interface region remains flexible and changes as the interface moves. As a result, the transformation proceeds again through the migration of a disordered interface with varying width, allowing approximately four crystalline layers of A15 to transform from one free energy minimum to the next in a single step. The estimated free energy barrier for interface migration during the A15→bcc transformation is approximately 1.3 – 1.5 eV, demonstrating quantitative agreement with the barrier obtained for the A15→bcc transformation without any restraint. Due to the free energy difference between bcc and A15, the barriers associated with interface migration during bcc→A15 transformation are much larger than for A15→bcc. In the current supercell setup, the potential energy difference between bcc and A15 is 86 meV/atom. Transitioning from one free energy minimum to the next along the A15→bcc transformation increases the number of bcc atoms by 256 – 320, resulting in a potential energy gain of 22 – 27 eV which is comparable to the free energy difference between subsequent minima. Along the linear path, the transformation proceeds through a disordered interface region with restricted fluctuations, see Fig. 4(e), where the amount of disorder is significantly lower than observed along the bumpy path. The smaller amount of disorder observed along the linear path results in larger energy barriers and additional minima and saddles in the free energy profile compared to the bumpy path, see Figs. 4(c) and (d), respectively. Due to the limited fluctuations at the disordered interface, only approximately two layers of crystalline A15 transform along [001] at a time, with a much larger barrier of 4 – 6 eV to an intermediate local minimum, followed by the transformation of the remaining two layers with an additional 1.3 – 1.7 eV barrier. The larger barrier is a consequence of the restrained width of the disordered region at the migrating interface, which leads to an increase in pressure and reduced space for structural rearrangements making the transformation rather costly (see supplemental Fig. S4).

Our simulations demonstrate that the formation of a disordered region at the interface plays a pivotal role in the transformation mechanism, fluctuating in width and facilitating structural rearrangements during solid-solid transformations. Furthermore, any collective variable suitable to describe the transformation does not only have to distinguish between and drive the formation of the crystalline phases, but also needs to correctly capture the fluctuations in disorder at the interface.



## B. Interface migration along different crystallographic directions

The formation of a disordered region at the moving interface is an important aspect of the transformation mechanism. The properties of the interface between the crystalline phases depend, however, strongly on the orientation relationship and coherency between the phases. Here, we focus on three systems with orientation relationships similar to those observed in W thin films, namely  $[001]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [001]_{\text{A15}}$ ,  $[110]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [110]_{\text{A15}}$ , and  $[210]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [210]_{\text{A15}}$ . All three systems were setup with supercell geometries optimized for bcc, leading to a 0.57% compression of A15 (see Sec. IID). This results in a driving force characterized by the potential energy difference between bcc and A15 of approximately 86 meV/atom. Conducting enhanced sampling simulations for a number of large supercells with several interface orientations is extremely demanding computationally. Therefore, we perform high temperature MD simulations of the A15→bcc transformation for an initial screening of the various systems to identify potentially interesting interface geometries.

To be able to register any movement of the interface, simulations are run at very high temperatures between  $T = 1600 - 2300$  K. For all systems, the A15→bcc transformation proceeds through the migration of a disordered interface where the disordered region dissolves preceding A15 layers, while bcc progressively grows layer-by-layer perpendicular to the interface. The average interface velocity at various temperatures for each orientation relationship is presented in Fig. 5 (a). The interface velocity increases with increasing temperature and varies significantly between distinct orientations with  $v_{[210]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [210]_{\text{A15}}} > v_{[001]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [001]_{\text{A15}}} > v_{[110]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [110]_{\text{A15}}}$ . Notably, the  $[110]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [110]_{\text{A15}}$  interface appears to be extremely immobile compared to the other two orientations, with its velocity at  $T = 2000$  K being only 0.05 m/s, comparable to  $[001]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [001]_{\text{A15}}$  at a much lower temperature of  $T = 1600$  K. This is also reflected in the activation energies estimated from the Arrhenius relation between temperature and rate for interface migration shown in Fig. 5 (b), with  $E_{[110]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [110]_{\text{A15}}}^{\text{act}} = 2.29$  eV  $>$   $E_{[001]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [001]_{\text{A15}}}^{\text{act}} = 1.56$  eV  $>$   $E_{[210]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [210]_{\text{A15}}}^{\text{act}} = 1.43$  eV. The results for the  $[001]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [001]_{\text{A15}}$  interface are in quantitative agreement with the free energy barriers in our enhanced sampling simulations in Section III A, as well as with previous high-temperature MD simulations for slightly smaller  $((8 \times 8)\text{bcc} \parallel (5 \times 5)\text{A15})$  and larger  $((16 \times 16)\text{bcc} \parallel (10 \times 10)\text{A15})$  supercells reporting activation energies of 1.7 eV and 1.4 eV, respectively [57]. The comparability in activation energies between different cell sizes indi-

cates that the cell sizes used in our simulations do not introduce significant errors due to periodic boundary conditions frustrating the layerwise transformation. Our analysis reveals that the variance in interface velocities and corresponding activation energies are predominantly governed by the planar densities of both the growing and shrinking phase parallel to the moving interface. Among the three orientations, bcc and A15 in (110) planes have the highest packing density (14.09 atom/nm<sup>2</sup> for bcc and an average of 8.26 atom/nm<sup>2</sup> for A15, see Tab. I). Consequently, interface migration along this direction is largely hindered as the disordered region is frustrated in the densely packed (110) planes with limited free volume for atomic shuffling, resulting in a high activation energy. The low planar density in both bcc and A15 (210) layers, on the other hand, easily accommodates structural rearrangements in the disordered interface region as evidenced by the high interface velocity and low activation energy in  $[210]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [210]_{\text{A15}}$ . The interface velocity is commonly connected with the interface mobility  $M$  through the driving force  $P$ ,  $v = MP$  [82]. Since all three systems are setup with identical lattice mismatch and contain the same number of bcc atoms per layer parallel to the interface, they share comparable initial driving forces given by the difference in potential energy and pressure. The variation in interface velocities can, therefore, mainly be attributed to the difference in interface mobilities following  $M_{(210)} > M_{(001)} > M_{(110)}$ , which is directly correlated with the planar densities.

Consistent with the discussion in Section III A, the properties of the disordered region at the moving interface remains a key feature in the transformation mechanism for different orientation relationships. Specifically, the planar density of the crystalline phases perpendicular to the growth direction directly impacts the density of the disordered region and its ability to facilitate atomic rearrangements, which, in turn, determine the interface mobility. While high-temperature MD simulations enable a fast screening of interface migration in different orientation relationships, the fast kinetics at elevated temperature might favour transformation mechanisms that are not representative at lower temperatures closer to experimental conditions, as discussed in the following Section.

### C. Exploring low mobility interface migration towards realistic temperatures

The  $[110]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [110]_{\text{A15}}$  interface exhibits by far the most sluggish migration and is seemingly immobile even at elevated temperatures that are far beyond experimental working

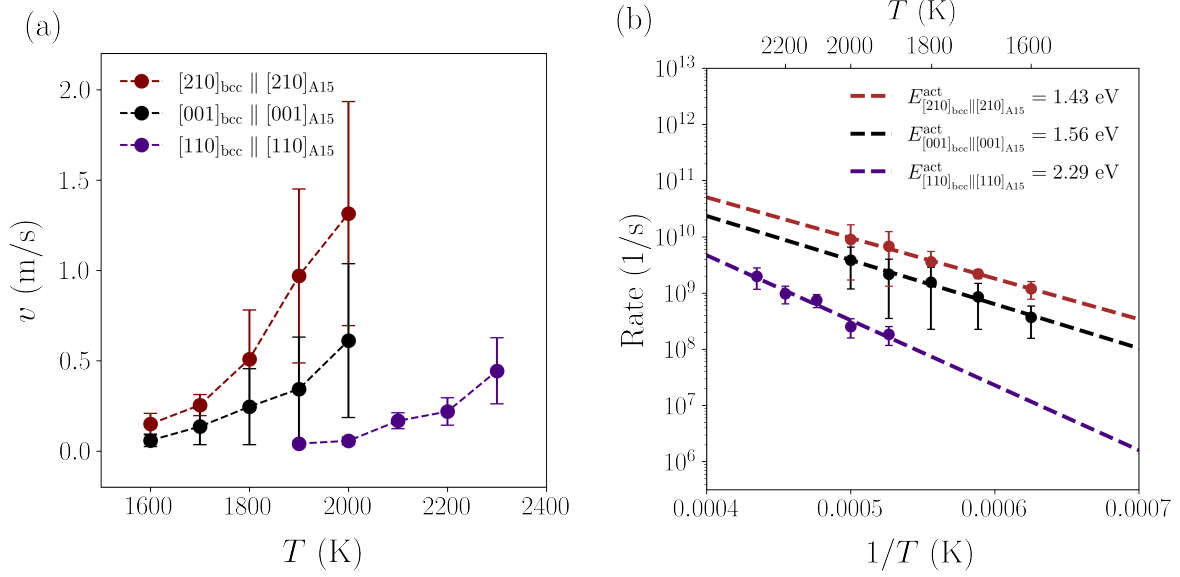


FIG. 5: (a) Average interface velocity as a function of temperature, and (b) Arrhenius plot of interface migration rate vs. the inverse temperature for different orientation relationships. Each point in the average velocity is calculated from a minimum of 100 values in 10 MD runs at every temperature.

conditions. This prompts an intriguing question regarding how interface migration proceeds at more realistic temperatures approaching experimental settings and whether the dominant transformation mechanisms differ from those observed in high-temperature MD simulations. Here, we employ enhanced sampling simulations to explore the migration of the low mobility  $[110]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [110]_{\text{A15}}$  interface at a temperature of  $T = 1300$  K, much lower than temperatures applicable in straightforward MD. Specifically, we performed a series of 30 metadynamics simulations to sample the A15 $\rightarrow$ bcc transformation along a linear path in the  $Y^{\text{bcc}}\text{-}Y^{\text{A15}}$  space between two end points  $\{Y^{\text{bcc}} : 0.20, Y^{\text{A15}} : 0.55\}$  and  $\{Y^{\text{bcc}} : 0.65, Y^{\text{A15}} : 0.10\}$  (see supplementary Fig. S5). The bcc $\rightarrow$ A15 transformation is not sampled here since this requires the addition of a restraining potential due to the substantial asymmetry in the free energy profile, which leads to considerable hysteresis in unrestrained simulations.

The A15 $\rightarrow$ bcc transition occurs within 80 – 240 ns across individual runs. The average path density in Fig. 6(a) exhibits again a zig-zag pattern with high (green/blue) and low (yellow) density regions, indicating that the sampled trajectories diverge from the predefined linear path. The average free energy profile of the transformation, shown in Fig. 6(b),

exhibits large complexity, consisting of a number of energy minima with varying depths connected by rugged transition states. The average amount of disorder at the interface projected along the path collective variable, Fig. 6(c), shows the same characteristics as the free energy, where the smallest amounts of disorder corresponds to free energy minima and the largest amounts of disorder to saddles. This indicates that an increase in width of the disordered region at the moving interface is needed to facilitate the barrier crossing from one energy minimum to the next. The rugged free energy profile as well as the average amount of disorder suggest that the transformation does not proceed through a simple layer-by-layer mechanism. Indeed, the interface migrates by combining interfacial ledge formation along [100] and subsequent flattening of the ledge to form complete layers of bcc and A15 along [110]. In Fig. 6(d), representative snapshots of each step in this complex transformation are illustrated. At the free energy minima, system configurations consist of full A15 and bcc layers with (110) planes, separated by a disordered interface of minimal width (configurations A, C, and E in Fig. 6(d)). Transitioning between energy minima involves an expansion of the disordered interface region and bcc growth occurs along the [100] direction rather than [110], reaching a local minimum at the saddle point (see configurations B and D in Fig. 6(d)). The interfacial ledge forms due to the difference in interface mobility in the [100] and [110] direction. (110) planes remain exceptionally immobile even at high temperatures, as demonstrated in the previous section. Consequently, interface migration along [100] exceeds that along [110], leading to the formation of interfacial ledges. The periodic boundary conditions limit the further extension of the interfacial ledges and the transformation continues by flattening along [110] to form a complete layer, reaching a local free energy minimum again with well-defined (110) planes of bcc and A15. In a macroscopic system, the propagation of interfacial ledges driven by differences in intrinsic mobilities along distinct orientations is anticipated to lead to faceting at the migrating interface. This, in turn, could give rise to diverse morphological characteristics in both the parent and product phase. Despite being limited by the simulation cell geometry, preferred growth along the high mobility direction is clearly evident at this lower temperature, which has not been observed in the dynamical evolution of the interface in high-temperature MD simulations. At elevated temperatures, substantial thermal fluctuations enable the system to overcome the energy barrier associated with growth along the [110] direction. Conversely, at lower temperatures, growth takes an alternative path along [100] that is energetically more favourable. This indi-

icates that the predominant mechanism governing the A15 $\rightarrow$ bcc transformation along [110] is strongly temperature-dependent. Therefore, extrapolating the transformation mechanism observed in high-temperature MD simulations to low-temperature conditions would lead to an incomplete understanding of the mechanism. This highlights the necessity to explore structural transformations at varying thermal conditions. To attain a comprehensive understanding of the complete picture of different transformation mechanisms, high-temperature MD simulations need to be complemented with low-temperature enhanced sampling.

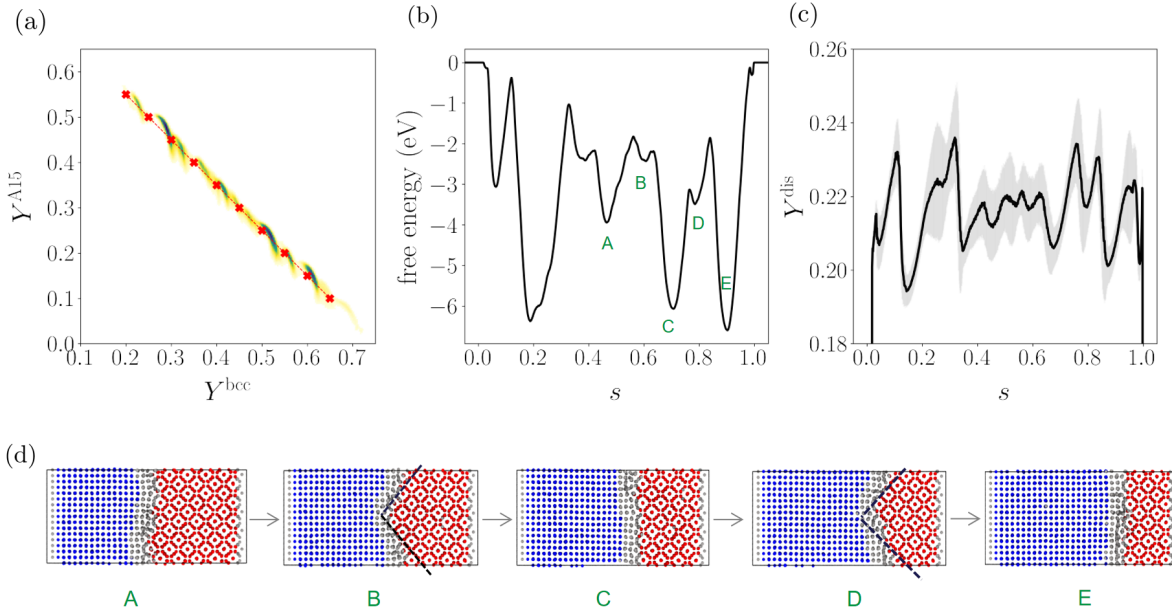


FIG. 6: A15 $\rightarrow$ bcc transformations for  $[110]_{bcc} \parallel [110]_{A15}$  interfaces. (a) Average path density together with the predefined linear path (red) in the  $Y^{bcc}$ - $Y^{A15}$  space; (b) average free energy profile; (c) amount of disorder at the interface projected along the path collective variable; the black solid line represents the average amount of disorder, the gray shaded area represents the standard deviation. (d) Representative configurations for different states along the free energy profile. A15 is colored in red, bcc in blue, and disorder in gray, respectively. The dashed lines in the configurations indicate interfacial ledge formation in the [100] direction.

## IV. CONCLUSION

Solid-solid transformations between structurally different crystalline phases are complex processes governed by the properties of the moving interface between the phases. Our results, employing extensive enhanced sampling simulations, reveal that a key aspect of the transformation mechanism is the formation of a disordered or amorphous region at the interface, which has also been observed experimentally in colloidal systems [37, 38, 83], metals [41–44], and perovskites [39, 40]. Most notably, the disordered region facilitates the rearrangement of atoms during growth and varies in width as the interface migrates. For the A15→bcc transformation in tungsten studied here, this fundamental mechanism is directly linked to the interface mobility, where orientation relationships between the two phases with low planar densities exhibit the largest mobility. For interfaces with high planar densities, the disordered region has a smaller free volume and becomes frustrated, limiting atomic rearrangements in the interface. Similarly, if the width of the disordered region is restrained, the shuffling of the atoms during the phase transformation is hindered which leads to a significant increase in the free energy barrier associated with interface migration. Consequently, the incorporation of defects, such as vacancies, could increase the available space required for atomic shuffling and effectively enhance the interface mobility.

The interface mobility directly impacts the preferred growth direction. The competition between different orientations is, however, temperature dependent. A direct consequence of this is that it is not always possible to extrapolate the growth behaviour observed in high-temperature MD simulations to lower temperatures. For the A15→bcc transformation along the low mobility [110] direction, our enhanced sampling simulations revealed the formation of interfacial ledges that did not appear at elevated temperatures. In macroscopic systems, this growth behaviour would eventually give rise to the formation of distinct morphologies. To be able to capture all relevant transformation mechanisms at meaningful temperatures, it is therefore essential to explore extended timescales with enhanced sampling methods.

Our findings offer an in-depth perspective on the fundamental atomic processes during interface migration and, specifically, the importance of the disordered interface region for the transformation mechanism. This could prove particularly valuable in promoting the control of microstructure evolution during structural phase transformations by manipulating the properties of interfaces, including structure, orientation, and defects, between different

crystalline phases in metals and alloys.

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## Supplementary Information

### Structural transformations driven by local disorder at interfaces

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## I. DESCRIPTORS OF LOCAL STRUCTURAL ENVIRONMENT

We used two classes of descriptor functions, the Behler-Parrinello symmetry functions [1, 2] and the Steinhardt bond order parameters [3], to serve as structural fingerprints for various local atomic environments. The descriptors are invariant towards translation, rotation, and exchange of two atoms of the same type. Specifically, there are 3 Steinhardt order parameters with  $l = 6, 7, 8$ ,

$$G_{q_l}^{(i)}(\mathbf{r}) = \sqrt{\frac{4\pi}{(2l+1)} \sum_{m=-l}^l |q_{lm}^{(i)}(\mathbf{r})|^2} \quad , \quad (1)$$

with

$$q_{lm}^{(i)}(\mathbf{r}) = \frac{\sum_{j \neq i} Y_{lm}(\mathbf{r}_{ij}) f_c(\mathbf{r}_{ij})}{\sum_{j \neq i} f_c(\mathbf{r}_{ij})} \quad (2)$$

where  $Y_{lm}(\mathbf{r}_{ij})$  represents the spherical harmonics,  $\mathbf{r}_{ij}$  denotes the distance between atoms  $i$  and  $j$ , and  $f_c(\mathbf{r}_{ij})$  is a smooth cutoff function,

$$f_c(\mathbf{r}_{ij}) = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if } |\mathbf{r}_{ij}| \leq r_{\min} \\ 0.5 \left( \cos \left[ \frac{(|\mathbf{r}_{ij}| - r_{\min})}{(r_{\max} - r_{\min})} \pi \right] + 1 \right) & \text{if } r_{\min} < |\mathbf{r}_{ij}| \leq r_{\max} \\ 0 & \text{if } |\mathbf{r}_{ij}| > r_{\max} \end{cases} \quad (3)$$

with  $r_{\min} = 3.8 \text{ \AA}$  and  $r_{\max} = 4.0 \text{ \AA}$ . We utilized two types of Behler-Parrinello radial symmetry functions,

$$G_2^i(\mathbf{r}) = \sum_{j \neq i} e^{-\eta(|\mathbf{r}_{ij}| - R_s)^2} f_c(\mathbf{r}_{ij}) \quad , \quad (4)$$

$$G_3^i(\mathbf{r}) = \sum_{j \neq i} \cos(\kappa |\mathbf{r}_{ij}|) f_c(\mathbf{r}_{ij}) \quad . \quad (5)$$

The values of the cutoff function are adjusted to  $r_{\min} = 6.2 \text{ \AA}$  and  $r_{\max} = 6.4 \text{ \AA}$ , accordingly. The parameters  $\eta$ ,  $R_s$ , and  $\kappa$  are determined from the overlap of the histograms of corresponding values computed for different structures in Mo obtained from MD simulations, as tabulated Tab. S1.

## II. VALIDATION OF THE TRAINED CLASSIFICATION NEURAL NETWORK

In order to ensure the trained model of the classification NN is robust for identifying structures at various thermal conditions and transferable to our W system, we generate

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TABLE S1: Various parameters for the symmetry functions. These parameters are determined from the overlap of histograms of corresponding values computed for different structures in Mo obtained from MD simulations [4].

$G_2$	$R_s(\text{\AA})$	$\eta(\text{\AA}^{-2})$	$G_3$	$\kappa(\text{\AA}^{-1})$
1	2.8	20.0	9	3.5
2	3.2	20.0	10	4.5
3	4.4	20.0	11	7.0
4	4.8	20.0		
5	5.0	20.0		
6	5.3	20.0		
7	5.7	20.0		
8	6.0	20.0		

a large test dataset of 125000 atomic environments by performing MD simulations at a constant pressure ( $P = 0$  bar). Specifically, we include the data computed for configurations extracted from MD runs at  $T = 300, 450, 600, 800, 1000, 1200, 1300, 1500, 1800,$  and  $2200$  K for various bulk structures and  $T = 4000, 5000, 6000$  K for liquid (25000 each for liquid and bulk structures). In Tab. S2, the accuracy score obtained for each test set is presented. We obtain a minimum accuracy of 98.9%, validating the transferability and accuracy of this NN model in the application of the structural identification in the W system.

TABLE S2: The accuracy obtained for the test set of various phases in W. Each test set contains 25000 data randomly extracted from MD configurations at different temperatures.

Phase	bcc	A15	fcc	hcp	liquid
Accuracy (%)	99.8	99.6	99.8	99.5	98.9

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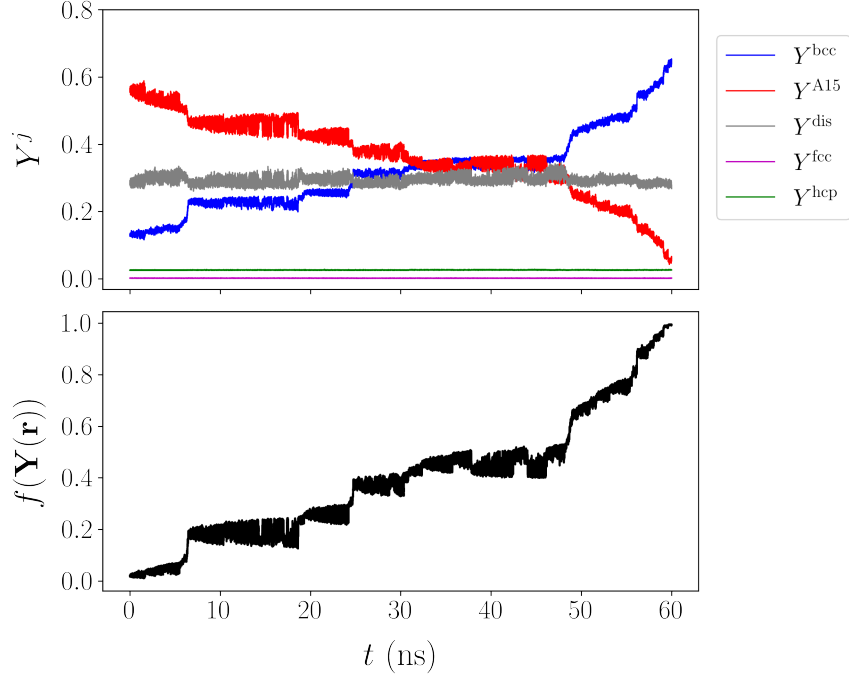


FIG. S1: Evolution of the global classifier  $Y^j$  for various phase of interest (top) and the path collective variable (bottom panel) extracted from a representative metadynamics run sampling the A15 $\rightarrow$ bcc transformation. The A15 fraction gradually decreases as the bcc phase grows. During this process, fcc and hcp phase are negligible, while disordered phase of 26-33% with respect to the current system size is always present. Along the interface migration during the A15 $\rightarrow$ bcc transformation, the path collective variable  $f(\mathbf{Y}(\mathbf{r}))$  gradually increases from 0 to 1.

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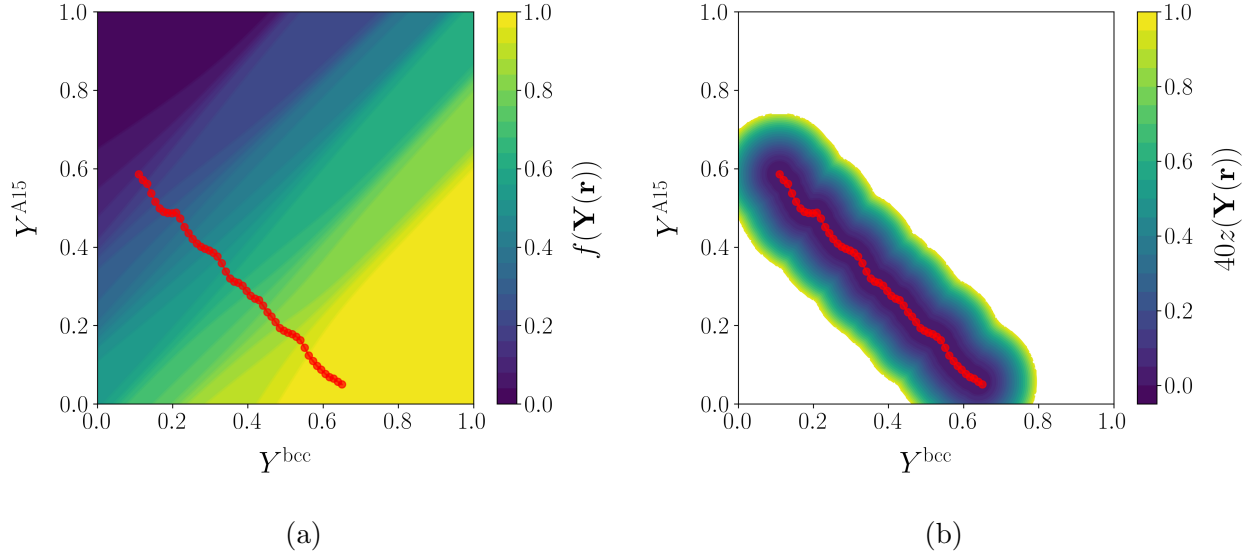


FIG. S2: Illustration of (a) the 'bumpy' path collective variable  $f(\mathbf{Y}(\mathbf{r}))$  and (b) the distance function  $z(\mathbf{Y}(\mathbf{r}))$  (multiplied by 40) together with the path (red points) in the  $Y^{\text{bcc}}-Y^{\text{A15}}$  space. The path is based on the average path density extracted from 60 metadynamics sampling A15 $\rightarrow$ bcc transformations without any restraint. The bumpy path is constructed by connecting 50 nodal points that are displaced equidistantly.

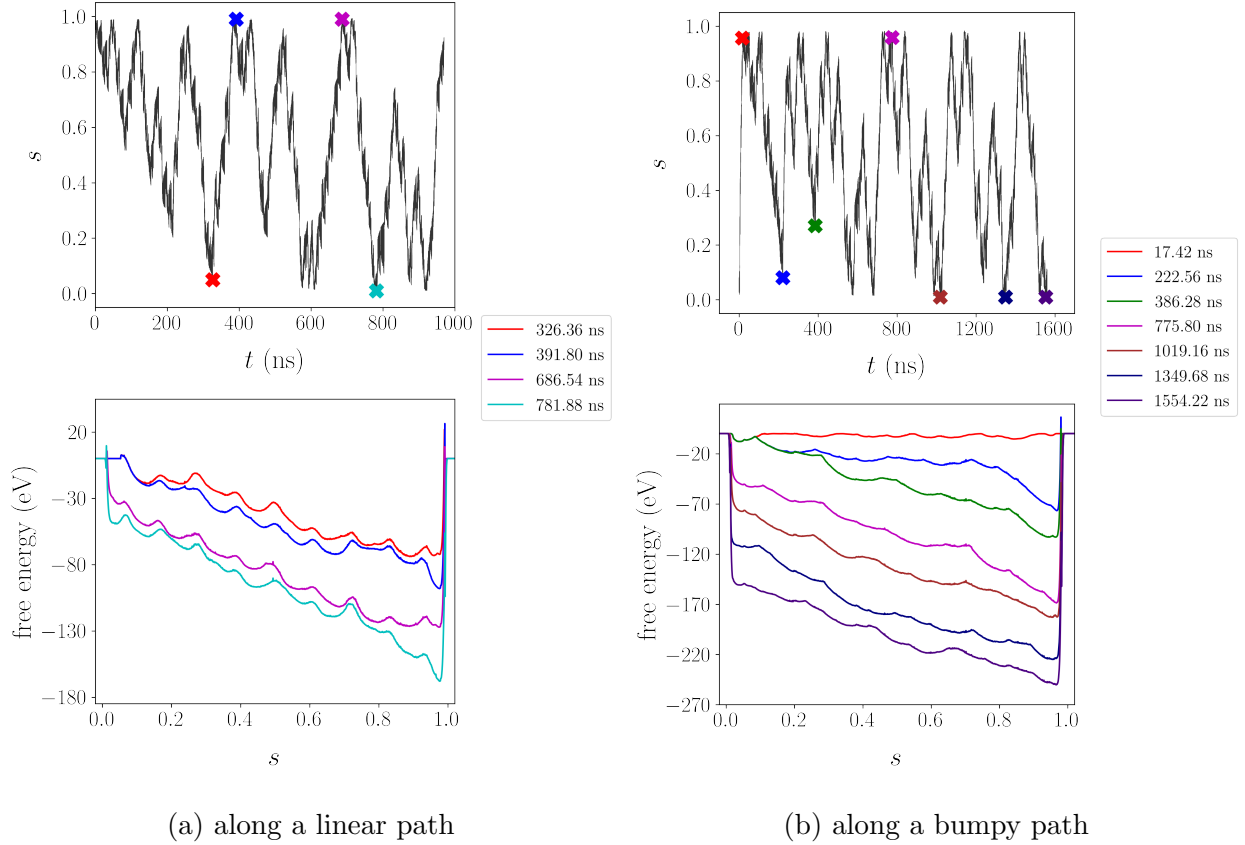


FIG. S3: Evolution of the path collective variable as a function of time (top) together with the extracted unbiased free energy profile (bottom) from metadynamics sampling of both the forward and backward  $A15 \leftrightarrow bcc$  transformation with a tight restraining potential: (a) sampled along the linear path, and (b) sampled along the bumpy path. In both cases, there is minimal hysteresis in the path collective variable during recrossing. The free energy profiles exhibit qualitative convergence with a constant offset in energies but little change in profiles.

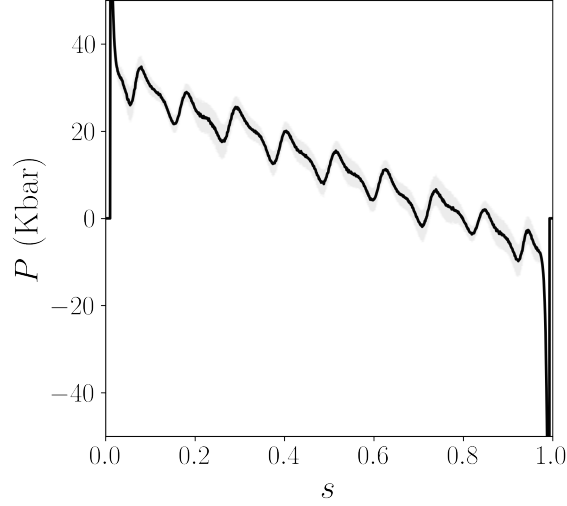


FIG. S4: Average pressure as a function of the path collective variable extracted from metadynamics runs sampling the A15 $\leftrightarrow$ bcc transformation along a linear path with a tight restraining potential. In the current cell geometry, the lattice mismatch compresses the A15 phase by 0.57%, and growing bcc leads to a decrease in pressure. The restraining potential limits the width of the disordered region at the migrating interface leading to reduced space for atomic shuffling and thus a periodic increase in pressure along the path collective variable.

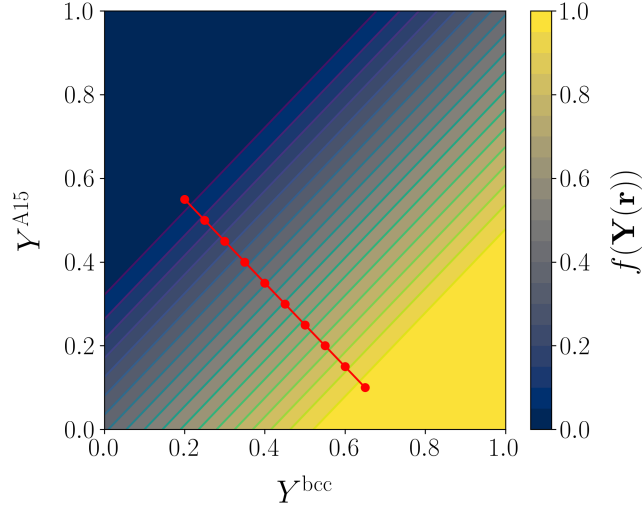


FIG. S5: Illustration of the path collective variable  $f(\mathbf{Y}(\mathbf{r}))$  with the path (red line) for the  $[110]_{\text{bcc}} \parallel [110]_{\text{A15}}$  system in the  $Y^{\text{bcc}} - Y^{\text{A15}}$  space. Ten equidistant points are distributed along this linear path. Two end points of the path are  $\mathbf{Y}_1 = \{Y^{\text{bcc}} : 0.20, Y^{\text{A15}} : 0.55\}$  and  $\mathbf{Y}_{10} = \{Y^{\text{bcc}} : 0.65, Y^{\text{A15}} : 0.10\}$ .