

Willie Doherty. *El Amnésico/The Amnesiac*

'History, Stephen said, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake'
James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1918)

El Amnésico (The Amnesiac), 2014 is a new video work by Willie Doherty that expands upon his preoccupation with the landscape as a repository of memory and unresolved trauma. Recent works such as *Secretion*, 2012 and *Remains*, 2013 have explored how stories relating to the recent past might be excavated from the topography of specific places in Kassel, Germany or Derry, Northern Ireland. It is as if, for Doherty, some residual material from the past remains embedded with the very landscape itself.

While Doherty adopts a more narrative form in *El Amnésico (The Amnesiac)*, there are also echoes of early works, such as *Re-Run*, 2002, *Non-Specific Threat*, 2004 and *Passage*, 2006, where he used the device of the repeated loop to suggest that the protagonist is caught or trapped within an endless cycle of repetition.

El Amnésico (The Amnesiac) begins and ends with a car journey where we see an unnamed man driving through a wooded landscape. What unfolds in between could be viewed as his return to a particular place, somewhere half remembered or half forgotten, or a momentary lapse in concentration from the tedium of driving, a daydream or rupture in the fabric of the everyday.

In a context of moral ambiguity, where one is asked to willfully forget the events of the past in order to construct the future, Doherty's amnesiac exists in the unguarded moments when a casual word or a familiar smell transports one back to the very thing that one can never forget, the image that cannot be erased.

El Amnésico (The Amnesiac) is accompanied by a group of 10 photographs that Doherty made in the locations where the video was shot. Entitled *Daño (Damage)*, 2014, the photographs are of trees that have been subjected to deliberate acts of vandalism and outbursts of violence. The traces and marks of the past, the detritus of some unknown activity shape the ecology of an unfamiliar terrain. The limits of what is visible begin to break down.

'To reflect upon the ethics of memory is, at first sight, a puzzling task. This is so because memory is not the first instance of an action, but a kind of knowledge like perception, or imagination and understanding. Memory constitutes a knowledge of past events or of the pastness of past events.'

Paul Ricoeur 'Memory and Forgetting' in Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (ed.), *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999, p.5.