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This and opposite page: Eight stills from Willie Doherty's *Secretion*, 2012, HD video, color, sound, 20 minutes.

CLOSE-UP

Swamp Thing

DAVID FRANKEL ON WILLIE DOHERTY'S *SECRETION*, 2012

THE WORLD OF WILLIE DOHERTY'S *Secretion*, 2012, is entropic and still, a place where little moves. Set up visually as a sequence of views of woods, waters, and a deserted house, the video might perhaps have come off as pastoral if shot in breezy sunshine but speaks instead of stagnation and decay. Shooting on windless days of gray light, Doherty finds fungi, lichens, and damp leaf litter in the dank forest, and growths, molds, and creeping mildews in the crumbling house. The only thing in motion is running water, but running water spreading spores of algae, or screened by a milky film. Combining these images with a spoken text telling a story of morbidity and corruption, Doherty makes a fallen tree look as sinister as a razor in a slasher film.

The voice-over narrative describes the slow development of a mysterious sickness, transmitted on some immaterial level. It begins in the woods, with dying trees. Scientists run tests but are bewildered. Gradually they realize that the spread of the disease bears a relation, first, to their unnamed country's network of rivers and waterways; and second, to certain former military sites, parts of some shameful national history now deliberately repressed. Finally they note that the virus, if that is what it is, seems to take opportunistic advantage of particular houses and apartments. "No reliable evidence was established that could connect these extreme outbreaks other than the identity of the occupant." The man on

whom the story centers, identified as X, happens to be one of those houses' occupants, and also to have worked as a guard at one of those military sites. By the tale's end, subject to "fungal growth" on his skin, "malodorous ruptures" on his face, and, finally, lesions over his entire body, accompanied by "low levels of paranoia, depression, and melancholia," he is either hallucinating himself as or actually is submerged in the dark waters of a canal, ambiguously both "slumbering" and a corpse.

I see a precursor to *Secretion* in Todd Haynes's film *Safe* (1995), in which Julianne Moore plays a woman who, like X, falls prey to an undiagnosable, untreatable wasting illness. Perceived even at the

Alexander and Bonin



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time as aesthetic prophecy, *Safe* sounded an early alarm on the modern risk society—on an environment at best uncertain and potentially too toxic to inhabit, and on the technologies, chemistries, and social structures that degrade it even when invented to guard against it. Purposefully and symbolically, Haynes left unclear just what Moore was suffering from; it was as if she had simply and largely become allergic to contemporary life. Doherty, though, indexes guilt and responsibility and gives his ailment a cause. Having made *Secretion* on commission for Documenta 13, in Kassel, and having filmed it in the surrounding countryside, he has said that in composing the work he had the German past in mind—that the sound track's clos-

ing description of a corpse in water, for example, was inspired by a photograph taken by Lee Miller at the end of World War II, showing the body of a concentration-camp guard floating in a canal. If both Haynes and Doherty make their malady simultaneously as omnipresent and unlocatable as the air we breathe, Doherty also ties it to specific human histories.

A sense of history is old for Doherty, who comes from Northern Ireland, a land with its own “former military sites” and its own recent stories of “detainees” held in such places. Doherty’s description of X’s job in what the script calls the “unit”—“to ensure that any human bodily secretions and emissions were washed off the concrete walls and floor”—surely has its model not only in the Holocaust but in the feces-covered walls of Ulster’s H-Blocks. (It is these “secretions and emissions,” incidentally, that eventually emerge as the cause of X’s illness, having leached out into the country’s rivers exactly through his attempts to wash them away.) It is also typical of Doherty to base his story in landscape, a long-standing visual trope in his work, which looks for a sense of the past in the fact that the landscape witnessed it.

But *Secretion* is as literary as it is visual, given the crucial role of Doherty’s carefully written narrative. The story rests in words; what we see on-screen is purely correlative, and as such almost abstract. And Doherty uses words skillfully. The film’s last line, for example, “The water into which the traces of [X’s] work had been absorbed carried him downstream and into the great rivers,” is on the one hand a poetic image of release, of dissolution into nature, as the word *great* shifts register from the reportorial and scientific language prevalent earlier in the script to something global and grand. That shift reminds me, for example, of the ending of Jim Jarmusch’s film *Dead Man* (1995), whose central character, William Blake (Johnny Depp), after a journey both particular and harrowing, is finally and at last eased into the great sea. On the other hand, Doherty has already established a sense of his unspecified country’s rivers and canals as vectors of the contamination, which they distribute like arterial veins. With the addition of X’s body to their flow, an invisible agent of transmission becomes all too physical. □

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