

**JEANETTE DOYLE**  
tough

APRIL – MAY 2008





## THE MORAL AMBIGUITY OF LOOKING

'tough' is an installation of new works by Jeanette Doyle. The work for the exhibition was created following her twelve-month residency programme at Location One, New York, between 2006 and 2007, supported by the Irish Arts Council and the Irish American Institute. The exhibition marks the first of a new series where mother's tankstation will show projects that have been produced as a result of a significant studio residency programme.

'Tough' is an adjective describing a person, a place, a task or a piece of meat that is either resilient or difficult. It is also used as an informal, abrupt and unfavourable response to a request; it is a door, closing. 'tough', like the response, is the title to Jeanette Doyle's exhibition of works which have each been developed from video footage the artist recorded while travelling on the back of a motorbike, at night, from Tiananmen Square to an art fair in Beijing. The footage records streetlamps and headlamps as they cast their light into the darkness before ultimately disappearing. In both of the exhibition's video works the soundtrack is taken from Sidney Lumet's film adaptation of Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* (1974). The footage: unidentifiable headlights driving towards the camera and then away into the night; like the soundtrack: thirteen unidentified murder suspects being brought towards and then away from conviction, both relate back to the title, and indeed to Doyle's broader practice, exploring the multiple points at which a 'truth' might be represented. A new 'truth', like the proverbial door, will inevitably open as soon as another closes.

'tough' comprises four works: two videos, a painting and a print, all derived from the Beijing footage. The significance of the work's route might be easily established, from Tiananmen Square, host to several significant and sensational marches against communism during the twentieth century, to the art fair, a symbol of China's current booming economy. The artist's journey might offer a simple analogy to the development of China's political system, however, the footage does not contain any overt symbolism and the coming and going of cars and motorbikes on a darkened highway might have been recorded anywhere. This restraint from the rhetorical is consistent throughout Doyle's new body of work.

The variable frame-rate of the sequences within the video works might be considered a significant compositional element. *Intro* (2007) is five minutes long, during which time Doyle's footage is divided into two speeds, each corresponding to a different sequence at the beginning of *Murder on the Orient Express*. In the first, Doyle's footage is slowed to a series of freeze frames in sync with the jazzy theatrical score from *Murder's* introductory credits. These specs of white and red light, once caught haphazardly and distorted unsystematically by the digital camera, become protagonists of Doyle's own investigation. In the second half of *Intro*, the soundtrack changes, now corresponding to the beginning of *Murder*, where a menacing score played by strings and percussion accompanies a mixed montage of moving and still images, respectively. In Lumet's work this score leads the reconstruction and documentation of a previous high-profile murder, which, in turn, shapes the motives and resolution of *Murder's* own mystery. Equally, in the second half of *Intro*, moving images are frozen at various intervals, marked by loud percussion. Both Lumet and Doyle however, use these similar frame rates to very different effect. For Lumet, these rostrums allow for these sensational newspaper headlines to structure or support the film's final conviction. For Doyle, however, these stills focus on incidental or

obscure moments, caught haphazardly, and it is the distance, or perhaps more accurately, the proximity between the obscure image and the historic or sensational image that seems at the basis of Doyle's current enquiry.

*Body* (2007, 65 min.) also uses the Beijing footage. Here, though, it is continuous and ongoing, without changing frame-rates or musical score. Instead the soundtrack is of actors' dialogue, as Poirot investigates Lumet's thirteen murder suspects. As a literary construction, the murder mystery is effective when the conviction of every possible suspect is equally plausible, or, more simply, when there are multiple possible truths. These exist until one particular argument outweighs another and is deemed logical, from which a resolution, conclusion, or condemnation is drawn. However, *Murder on the Orient Express* is not a typical construction within its literary genre, as ultimately all of the suspects are found guilty. Throughout *Body's* soundtrack, each conviction is supplanted by the next, but ultimately all are validated.

On the opposite side of the gallery to *Body's* monitor hang a print and what appears to be a painting, however, both have been produced digitally. The larger, *Frame (print)*, a still from *Intro*, is entirely black but for a car's head and rear lights to the right of centre. Red and white lights bleed into one another, over-exposed and blurred from enlargement. Nearby hangs the exhibition's fourth work, *Frame (waterpainting)*, which shares its formal composition with *Frame (print)*, but here it is smaller and has been 'painted' with water. The seemingly incidental image has been taken from one of many possible stills, which, like any of the *Murder* suspects, might be isolated, validated, or convicted at any point. What distinguishes the two prints is that one has been 'painted' upon, a gesture which ties it to a history of traditional rather than digital media, and, arguably, affects its reception. The isolation of the still is a significant critical gesture, made more complex by Doyle's use of new media. The fragmentation of the narrative in film, according to film theorist Laura Mulvey, took place long before the development of new technology, alongside early critical practices of textual analysis from the late 1950s onwards.<sup>1</sup> Since then, many film-makers and artists such as Chris Marker or James Coleman have used stills in their films or installations, gestures that have intended the viewer to acknowledge their own active contribution to the work and its reception. However, beyond these critical practices, Doyle's gesture of painting one of two identical digital stills, in a substance as banal as water, seems to openly question not only at what we are looking, but how.

Doyle often records spectacular or sensational events or pathways from obscure angles and from them isolates seemingly innocuous stills. These obscure shots, rather than undermining the importance of the recorded location or event, question the politics of representation, illustrated through her strategic use of narrative soundtrack. A previous work, *St Patrick's Day Parade, New York (2006-7)* is a triptych of television monitors, the central one displaying a video of the parade recorded from opposite the Metropolitan Museum of Art. A full view of the parade is restricted by the camera's fixed position, which transects rather than pans alongside it so that the performers can only be watched fleetingly as they pass. This brief glimpse is in sharp contrast to the soundtrack, where the marching bands are constantly audible, making the listener uncomfortably aware of the restricted visuals. Similarly, *Starline Tours (2007)* uses its soundtrack to alert us to that which is purposefully unrepresented. Like *Body*, it was filmed with the artist's hand-held camera, this time on a bus-tour of the stars' homes in the Hollywood Hills. However, rather than pointing the camera towards the spectacle, Doyle focuses on the other side of the road, on hedges, gates and roadsides. We cannot see the Beverly Hills Cop house, or Alfred Hitchcock's wrought-iron gates, introduced with amusing uninterest by the tour-guide. The soundtrack in *Starline*, as in *Parade* and *Body*, is a narrative: a celebrity tour, a musical performance, a murder mystery, but





instead of a corresponding narrative shot we receive an abstract shot. What we are seeing – the Met, the bush, the bike – is not what we are looking for and this provokes a quite valuable tension.

Beyond the shortcomings of representation, Doyle's work also explores its consequences. In an earlier essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey used psychoanalysis as a tool to explore the shortcomings of female representation in mainstream narrative cinema. Here, the 'satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure' – close-ups of the legs or faces of screen sirens like Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo – was a narrative device that helped the audience, gazing at legs or faces, relate to the male protagonist, also gazing at legs and faces. Mulvey claims that the audience's gaze had two forms, voyeuristic (the ongoing observation of the female form) and fetishistic (a more isolated or fleeting type of observation).<sup>2</sup> This relationship continually reduced the female star to the 'bearer of meaning' and elevated the male star to the 'maker of meaning'.<sup>3</sup> Similar devices are at play here, as Doyle constantly promises and denies the viewer the sensational images they require, caught as they now are, as Mulvey writes, 'in the moral ambiguity of looking'. This inherent tension draws awareness to ongoing processes of objectification in contemporary systems of representation, be they artistic or political.

Doyle's new work offers a sophisticated and open-ended enquiry into alternative modes of representation that are neither reductive nor rhetorical – a task that is both important and tough.

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<sup>1</sup> Mulvey, Laura, 'Stillness in the Moving Image: Ways of Visualising Time and Its Passing', from *Saving the Image: Art After Film*, Leighton, Tanya, and Buckler, Pavel, eds (CCA Glasgow/Manchester Metropolitan University, 2003), pp. 88–9

<sup>2</sup> '[Freud] associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze.' Mulvey, Laura, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', published in *Screen*, Autumn 1975, II:A

<sup>3</sup> Mulvey elaborates this theory through Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, 'In *Vertigo*, in particular, the look is central to the plot, oscillating between voyeurism and fetishistic fascination... The spectator, lulled into a false sense of security by the apparent legality of his surrogate [Scottie], sees through his look and finds himself exposed as complicit, caught in the moral ambiguity of looking.' Ibid; III: C2