Paul Magagnoli shows how the representation of violence — and the attraction to it — within Paul Chan’s *Tin Drum Trilogy* dovetails with recent scholarship on the visual politics of human rights.

The *Tin Drum Trilogy* (2002—05), Paul Chan’s series of video essays, explores three different moments of George W. Bush’s war on terrorism: the US decision to invade Afghanistan (*Re: The Operation*, 2002), the life of Baghdad’s citizens under Saddam Hussein regime before the US occupation (*Baghdad in No Particular Order*, 2003) and the war at home dividing red (Republican) and blue (Democrat) states (*Now Promise Now Threat*, 2005). The series is a trilogy only in hindsight. The three videos were conceived separately and screened individually until 2005, when, for a solo exhibition at Franklin Art Works in Minneapolis, Chan began to show them together. The trilogy can be distinguished from the animated projected drawings and installations for which the artist is more widely known. Space and duration play a less important role than they do in the artist’s installations, which can last up to five hours, as in the case of *Sade for Sade’s sake* (2005). *Baghdad in No Particular Order* is the longest of the three single-channel videos (50 minutes), while *Re: The Operation* and *Now Promise Now Threat* are each approximately half an hour in length. The videos are also characterised by a hybrid documentary style. Interviews, handheld camera shooting, animation, poetic voice-over, digital distortion, photomontage, found footage and archival photographs appear in all three works. Because of its blending of fictional and non-fictional representational strategies, the trilogy clearly possesses an affinity to those contemporary practices by artists (such as Hito Steyerl and Walid Raad) whose ambition is to reinvent the creative possibilities of documentary beyond the merely informational.1

*Re: The Operation* is based on a fantasy concocted by Chan that requires us to imagine the members of the Bush Cabinet as if they were GIs on the front line in Afghanistan. The video is divided into chapters, each dedicated to one representative of the Bush administration. Each chapter is introduced by animated drawings showing the severed head of the politician bandaged and bloodied, barely alive. The drawings are followed by a voice-over narrative — written by Chan — that reads aloud the hypothetical letters that the Cabinet member would send to his or her family back home. Sometimes the content of these letters is banal: Secretary of Transportation Norman Mineta drafts a to-do list that includes confirming military targets and finding a shipment of felt-tip markers, complimentary copies of *Reader’s Digest* and two hundred pounds of body bags. Sometimes the letters contain explicit references to sexual violence: ‘I will love you in a way that goes beyond your true self’, US Attorney General John Ashcroft says in a letter addressed to Elaine Chao, Secretary of Labor. ‘And that’s why it will hurt, because I will mutilate you.’ Political figures such as Condoleezza Rice, Dick Cheney or Colin Powell engage in philosophical meditations on history and death and quote from Georg Hegel, Martin Heidegger and Maurice Blanchot. ‘This operation’, Rice declares, ‘is the pivot point of a new kind of time.’ Most of the video is a slow progression of still photographs. These montages feature manipulated photographs of the politicians in GI uniforms on nondescript military bases; various photographs (of airport hallways, train coaches, museum displays, chocolate cakes, tourists holding cameras, fragments of white walls, anonymous passers-by, empty skies, body parts, pets, graffiti and scribbled

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1 On these practices, see Hito Steyerl and Maria Lind (ed.), *The Greenroom: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008.
notes on crumbled paper); and ‘photographic accidents’ that we would quickly erase with the press of a button on a digital camera. At times, this glut of images is interrupted by clips of visual and aural noise produced through various digital effects and distortions. An eerie high-pitched music, edging in and out of tune, adds an uncanny and anxious feeling to the disparate and everyday content of the images.

Baghdad in No Particular Order was produced on the occasion of the artist’s trip to Iraq in December 2002, a few months before the beginning of the US invasion. In September of the same year Chan was contacted by the pacifist group Voices in the Wilderness (now called Voices for Creative Nonviolence), an NGO protesting against the US-UN sanctions that were designed to topple the government of Saddam Hussein by denying food and medical supplies to the Iraqi people. Voices in the Wilderness asked Chan to join their members in a trip to the Iraqi capital aimed at collecting testimonies to be used for a campaign against the imminent war. Chan accepted the invitation and spent a month in Baghdad meeting with local artists and activists and helping the NGO with the production of video footage, websites and PowerPoint presentations. Later Chan turned the footage into an art project. Baghdad in No Particular Order does not indulge in a rhetoric of victimisation, nor does it provide viewers with detailed facts and meticulous statistics, as is common in conventional human rights videos. Rather, the video comprises everyday, uneventful scenes: Iraqi families and children are shown merrily dancing, oblivious to the coming war; a monkey with an almost human face sleeps in a cage in a hotel lobby, his eyes darting back and forth under his eyelids; a young singer with a stunned look strives to improvise a song in front of a silent audience. Baghdad is rendered simultaneously banal and strange. The shaky handheld camerawork, the often low resolution of the images and the ostensibly unedited form of the video produce an effect of randomness and improvisation that recalls George Kuchar’s Weather Diaries (1986–90). All the footage has been shot by Chan through a small digital camera (we sometimes hear his voice off-screen). As in Kuchar’s first-person documentaries, in Baghdad in No Particular Order the camera is situated as an extension of the author’s body and mediates his encounters with the Iraqi people.

Now Promise Now Threat, made two years later, conveys an image of the heavily Republican Midwestern states that challenges the assumption that they are home to religious fanatics and nationalist warmongers by showing nuances among their attitudes
towards faith and patriotism. The video discusses the reasons for Bush’s 2004 re-election through a series, for example, of interviews with the denizens of Omaha, Nebraska. A Lutheran minister who supports Evangelical Christians opposes the mixing of religion and the state on religious grounds; a young mother who is anti-abortion finds it hypocritical that the pro-life movement is also pro-war and pro-death penalty; and a young man declares he is willing to go to war not because he endorses the Bush administration, but simply because he wants to receive a free education and to have a purpose in life. The interviews are followed by footage of forlorn suburban landscapes battered by gusty winds and dotted by churchgoers. At times aphoristic intertitles interrupt and comment on the interviews (one reads: ‘so it’s almost like punishment?’). Clips of public-access shows from Omaha cable-television stations make impromptu appearances: a preacher praises the Lord; a muscular instructor teaches self-defence techniques; a weatherman shows forecasts which Chan has given ironic legends such as ‘Fargo — So and So’, ‘Kansas City — Mournful’, ‘Minneapolis — Fucked’. These ordinary scenes are disrupted by long clips from kidnapping and beheading videos. Downloaded from jihadi websites, the clips are transformed into fields of undulating colour and sometimes are juxtaposed with the voices of the Omaha interviewees. As in Re: The Operation, sound effects play a significant role in transforming the banality of the imagery into something strange and somehow disquieting. Brief electronic tunes, whispering voices and humming noises create the sense that this Midwestern landscape is haunted by ghostly presences.

Chan’s trilogy takes its name from Günter Grass’s novel The Tin Drum (1959). ² Raising such profound and painful issues as the extent to which the German public was complicit in Nazi war crimes, Grass’s novel chronicles the story of the family of Oskar Matzerath, a boy who at the age of three decides to stop growing and ends up in a mental institution. Oskar repudiates the mores of Fascist Germany and its post-War amnesia, and expresses his rage by constantly playing a toy drum and developing a high-pitched singing voice that he can use to break glass. Chan’s trilogy possesses significant formal affinities with Grass’s work: both rely on hyperbolic excess, the grotesque and a combination of the sublime and the prosaic in describing a world where social cohesion seems to be falling

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apart. Chan’s series also shares with Grass’s masterpiece an ambivalent fascination with violence. ‘Built up, chopped down, wiped out, hauled back, dismembered.’

So begins a chapter of Grass’s novel, which features several dispassionate descriptions of violent deaths. Similarly, while Chan’s video trilogy is supposed to offer a critique of the Bush administration’s systematic use of violence and destruction, it also displays a certain paradoxical attraction to it. The three videos betray an almost obsessive interest in the cultural and psychological effects of violence through their fragmentary form; their digital distortions and degradations; and repeated references to death, torture and pain.

In *Now Promise No Threat* violence simmers below the surface of the dull Nebraska landscape: it emerges from the staged self-defence fights filling the airtime of local television stations; it impregnates the liturgy of the Evangelical church (Chan’s camera focuses on glasses of red wine, symbols of the blood of Christ); it permeates the language of some of the prophetic intertitles (‘The good cannot reign over all without an excess emerging whose fatal consequences are revealed to us in tragedy’). More significantly, violence haunts the viewer through the distorted clips of beheadings and kidnappings that are repeated throughout the works. Chan’s manipulations have an intrinsic beauty to them, and, indeed, one feels mesmerised watching these abstract patches of whites, reds and yellows nervously expanding and contracting on screen. Violence also lurks under the apparently light-hearted and feisty atmosphere of Baghdad. In *Baghdad in No Particular Order* a group of middle-aged women brandish guns and sing patriotic songs in honour of Saddam Hussein; a quiet prayer in a cramped mosque steadily escalates into a trance-like noisy dance; and the blurred pictures of Iraqi children who died during a US bombing after the first Iraq war remind us of the tragic recent history of the country. It is, however, on the website published alongside the video that Chan hints at the possible critical and redemptive value of destruction. It shows the terrifying picture of an Iraqi baby, his face completely disfigured. The photograph’s caption, written by the artist, states that the baby was hit by a depleted uranium shell, and concludes: ‘The hope is always that the pain inflicted upon the body will yield new insights and pleasures that will teach us to outgrow our madness.’ In a short essay, written for the exhibition ‘Greater New York’ (2010) at MoMa PS1, he suggests that pain can have a positive and generative dimension, and uses the term ‘kairos’ to describe his ideal notion of art (from the Greek ‘καιρός’, meaning the ‘propitious or supreme moment’). Kairos is ‘a vital or lethal place in the body [...] where mortality resides’, the artist writes. According to Chan, the traumatic encounter with death and violence, which kairotic art is supposed to offer, can trigger new insights into our inner self and our society: ‘Kairos is that critical point in time when a crisis or rupture opens up and is catalysed with human will to create new potential.’

A similar sense of apocalyptic destruction characterises the artist’s jarring animations, which gained him notoriety in the art world. ‘My birds... trash... the future (2004) is a seventeen-minute digital animation in which ominous birds, desperate dogs and several suicide bombers rape, main, eat and terrorise one another. *Happiness (finally) after 35,000 Years of Civilization — after Henry Darger and Charles Fourier* (2000–03) depicts a peaceful and bucolic landscape where a community of prepubescent ‘Vivian’ girls lives in harmony until this pleasurable world erupts in violence as men in suits and army uniforms invade. *The 7 Towers (2005–07)* shows ghostly silhouettes of various bodies falling down, reminiscent of the images of people jumping out of the Twin Towers. The shadow play of *Sade for Sade’s sake* describes figures of slaves and masters...
derived from the Marquis de Sade’s novel *The 120 Days of Sodom* (1785), and is similar to *Re: The Operation* in its eroticisation of violence. In the latter’s fantasy of the Bush administration fighting in Afghanistan, references to forbidden sexual desires abound. ‘Who, besides men,’ asks Condoleezza Rice, ‘doesn’t think that sex is a kind of low-intensity warfare exercise?’ The theme of a perverse fetishistic desire dominates President Bush’s chapter. ‘I feel evil from the work and dirty from the pleasure of passivity that duty demands’, reads Bush’s letter to his wife, Laura, while low-resolution pixelated images of S&M practices appear on screen. In a nondescript living room, a woman wears leather, with her mouth gagged and her legs tied up; a man strokes his crotch while we hear creepy moans, screams and synthesised music. Numerous images of wounds, body parts and scars crop up throughout *Re: The Operation*, veiled references to the logic of sexual fetishism, as well as to the title of the work, evoking military action as well as surgery.

This fascination for eroticised violence turns *Re: The Operation* into a remake of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s notorious film *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (*Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, 1975). *Salò* transposed the narrative of De Sade’s infamous book, set in eighteenth-century France, onto the last days of Benito Mussolini’s regime at the end of World War II. The film depicts four Fascist leaders in the act of torturing a group of handsome boys and girls whom they kidnapped from a nearby village in the north of Italy.9 Inside the rooms of a lavish villa, the Fascists force the adolescents to participate in orgies, masturbation and coprophagic and sodomitic acts. Violence emerges as a meticulous ritual whereby each act of torture appears as a highly organised theatrical event. The libertines, moreover, appear as erudite intellectuals who quote Marcel Proust, Charles Baudelaire and Friedrich Nietzsche, and adorn the walls of their castle with modernist painting by Fernand Léger, Giacomo Balla, F.T. Marinetti and Mario Sironi. *Salò* ends with a terrible sequence in which all the teenagers are killed by the Fascist militia, their eyes slashed and their skulls cut open. Eroticised violence likewise appears in *Baghdad in No Particular Order*. The adolescent girls belly dancing in front of the camera resemble *Salò*’s adolescents as well as Darger’s Vivian girls, who appear in Chan’s *Happiness (finally) after 35,000 Years*.
of Civilization. Possibly soon-to-be victims of the imminent war, these teenagers look straight at us, inciting a certain voyeuristic pleasure on our part while also addressing our complicity, as media viewers, in the spectacularisation of war. Chan’s eroticisation of violence is a provocative strategy through which the artist critically channels the power dynamics that govern the production and consumption of images of war. This reflection seems particularly urgent today, when the situation in Iraq has triggered a proliferation of cinematic and internet images of violence, a phenomenon that has been called ‘torture porn’ or ‘war porn’. This is exemplified by websites such as nowthatsfuckedup.com, shut down by US federal authorities in 2005. On this website American soldiers posted close-up shots of dead Iraqi insurgents and civilians in exchange for access to porn images, in lieu of paying the $10 registration fee.

The artist’s attraction to violence opens up serious questions regarding the use of images of physical abuse in order to garner interest in the politics of human rights. Is the depiction of violence necessary in order to provoke spectators and induce them to protest against human rights violations, or, alternatively, is graphic violence always voyeuristic and further degrading to the victim? While, as we have seen, Chan addresses the problematic power relationships that characterise the consumption of images of violence, he also seems, perhaps dangerously, to argue in favour of a certain use of violence and destruction. In a conversation in 2005 with Martha Rosler, he passionately debated the benefits of watching Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ (2004), claiming that despite the director’s conservative political agenda, the film was to be seen since its spectacle of cruelty provided a key to understanding and deconstructing the ideology of the right wing. ‘What’s the point of making the audience suffer?’ Rosler asked Chan. ‘I think it is another factor with which you provoke people’, Chan replied. ‘Boredom is one of them, and intense suffering that comes from bodily suffering could be another.’

In other words, for Chan a certain use of violence can be welcome — the shock it produces


can activate the viewer’s thinking and political awareness. In other interviews Chan has spoken in favour of an art of immanence that would embrace destruction and violence as these are, for him, the forces that qualify our present historical condition. In an interview with George Baker he defined this aesthetic as ‘art-as-affirmation’, without further elaborating. 12 Perhaps it would be instructive to read Chan’s ambivalent fascination with violence as a strategy of ‘mimetic adaptation’ or ‘mimetic exacerbation’. 13 According to Hal Foster, mimetic exacerbation constitutes the avant-garde model articulated by Zürich Dada artists such as Hugo Ball, who in their works used parody, montage and chaos as a ferocious critical response to the disasters of World War I. Mimetic exacerbation is a conscious strategy of degradation as self-defence, premised on the notion that violence can shock but also soothe, and that a ‘homeopathic’ dose of self-destruction can actually be generative. While Chan never mentioned Dada as the inspiration for the trilogy, his series of video essays may be situated within this avant-garde tradition.

Chan’s appropriation of violence dovetails with recent scholarship on the visual politics of human rights; this literature has argued, contrary to the postmodernist pessimism of authors such as Susan Sontag, that such politics requires and even benefits from the representation of violence. 14 As Sharon Sliwinski recently demonstrated, since its beginnings in the eighteenth century the discourse of human rights has heavily and successfully relied on the use and circulation of images often portraying acts of brutality. More crucially, the response of disgust and outrage triggered by these images was key to the formation of the universal ideals of human rights. Likewise, in the field of photography theory, Susie Linfield has remarked that documents of suffering can also be ‘documents’ of protest,’ 15 and, in a more nuanced way, Judith Butler has observed that, after their discovery, the circulation and re-framing of the Abu Ghraib pictures in magazine publications and museums meant that grief and outrage were scattered among the public with the result that the images of instruments of degradation were transformed into an indictment for the violation of human dignity. 16 The photographs were published in the online journal Salon and shown in 2004 at the International Center for Photography (ICP) in New York in the exhibition ‘Inconvenient Evidence: Iraqi Prison Photographs from Abu Ghraib’. ‘The exhibition of the photographs’, writes Butler, ‘with caption and commentary on the history of their publication and reception becomes a way of exposing and countering the closed circuit of triumphalist and sadistic exchange that formed the original scene of the photograph itself.’ 17

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However, despite frequent allusions to brutality, sadomasochism and abuse, violence remains largely off-screen in the Tin Drum Trilogy. Indeed, the three videos spare viewers from such overwhelming and unbearable pain as the truly unwatchable Salò and The Passion of the Christ. In Salò viewers are obliged to watch the blood that oozes from the teenagers’ mouths when they swallow food laced with nails. In The Passion of the Christ they see Jesus scorched and beaten to death. In contrast, in Chan’s trilogy violence is never actually performed in front of the camera but instead is displaced on the surface of the image itself through visual and aural noise, distortions and manipulations. Rather than the degradation of human beings through torture and other unlawful acts, the videos show the degradation of the video signal. When references to scenes of abuse

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13 For the concept of ‘mimetic adaptation’ or ‘mimetic exacerbation’, see H. Foster, ‘Dada Mime’, October 105, Summer 2003, pp.166—76.
17 Ibid., p.96.
appear in the trilogy, they are obscured through the superimposition of abstract fields of colour or through heavy digital pixelation and blurring. However, it is important to note that in Chan’s series sound plays a crucial part in evoking violence. As in horror films, in his works we become aware of the execution of terrible acts of abuse and torture only through particular aural effects: moans, brief high-pitched screams, creaking noises, disturbing humming sounds. It is above all through the manipulation of the human voice that Chan alludes to violence. The distorted clips of beheadings in *Now Promise Now Threat* are accompanied by sounds of distant muttering voices evoking human speech faltered at its physical core. In other words, Chan capitalises on what Michel Chion has called the ‘added value’ of sound to represent the violence of war.  

We could read Chan’s use of visual and aural distortion as part of a Blanchotian aesthetic of erasure, or désouvrement. For Blanchot désouvrement is a writing that lacks coherence and meaning and which provides the most ethical way to represent and remember such traumatic events as the Holocaust. According to him the coherence of a well-formed commentary on the disaster would make the disaster itself a ‘forgettable’ event, a fait accompli, that has been already fully processed by memory. As literary historian Thomas Carl Wall has argued, Blanchot’s writing is a language in ruins ‘that tear[s] itself apart from the moment it begins to speak.’  

Writing’, Blanchot declared, ‘is not destined to leave traces, but to erase, by traces, all traces, to disappear in the fragmentary space of writing more definitively than one disappears in the tomb, or again, to destroy, to destroy invisibly, without the uproar of destruction.’

Thinking back to Chan’s practice in view of Blanchot’s notion of désouvrement, we may come to understand his use of noise, blurred animations and visual distortions as similar tactics that aim to keep the strangeness

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18 Michel Chion defines sound’s ‘added value’ as ‘the expressive and informative value with which a sound enriches a given image so as to create the definite impression, in the immediate or remembered experience one has of it, that this information or expression “naturally” comes from what is seen, and is already contained in the image itself’. M. Chion, *Audio-vision: Sound on Screen* (ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman), New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p.5.


of the original event. These effects could be interpreted as the artist’s attempt to achieve an art of remembrance based on Blanchotian abstraction or absence. Importantly, for Blanchot, the aesthetic of erasure offered the proper antidote to historical amnesia. Destruction in Blanchot’s theory is not the equivalent of indifference to the past. Rather, it is closely tied with a profound ethical impulse — that is, the imperative to remember despite the unspeakable horror provoked by events such as the Holocaust. ‘What Blanchot also insists upon’, Steven Shaviro has observed, ‘is that this non-presence of the past, its irre recuperability, is equally its failure to be altogether absent. Because I cannot memorialise the past, I cannot liberate myself from it.’

However, Chan’s ‘writing of the disaster’ raises some crucial questions regarding the works’ effectiveness within a visual politics of human rights. Does the articulation of this politics depend on the fidelity of representation to the historical referent? If so, does Chan’s strategy of erasure risk undermining the political aspirations of his work? In defence of the Tin Drum Trilogy, we might argue that its erasure or shattering of the signifier arms, rather than denies, the humanity of the victims. As Butler has observed, commenting on the blurred faces of the Abu Ghraib victims of torture, ‘the faces and names [of the victims] are not ours to know, and affirming this cognitive limit is a way of affirming the humanity that has escaped the visual control of the photograph’. For Butler, not only does the erasure of the faces of the tortured Iraqi prisoners protect the victims from further humiliation, it also preserves, although negatively, the ‘incommensurability’ of human life, which should escape any normative definition. Implicit in her argument is the idea that any visual representation of an individual’s suffering entails some element of violence and abstraction. Thus, to return to Chan’s trilogy of war, we might say, following Butler, that his aesthetic of erasure is a recognition of the element of violence that is intrinsic to visibility, and, consequently, that his aesthetic is an attempt to further avoid a ‘pornography’ of war.

22 Ibid., p.830.