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## *The Prayers and Tears of Paul Chan: Profane Illumination and the Post-Secular in BAGHDAD IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER and Now promise now threat*

**Source:** Video Data Bank's *Tin Drum Trilogy*, 2009

Now if tears come to the eyes, if they well up in them, and if they can also veil sight, perhaps they reveal, in the very course of this experience, in the coursing of water, the essence of the eye...the eye would not be destined to see but to weep. For at the moment that they veil sight, tears would unveil what is proper to the eye.

—Jacques Derrida

We penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable and the impenetrable as everyday.

—Walter Benjamin

...in the twenty-first Century, I didn't think I'd have to think about God ever again.

—Paul Chan

*"Here is a Sufi poem" states a voice in French. A turbaned man appears sitting cross-legged with a microphone in his hand, flanked by several other men with drums; they are on the verge of crying, wiping their eyes as if in anticipation of some inevitable or immemorial pain; as the poet begins his plaintive incantation, the camera details a series of variously agitated faces in the audience surrounding the master of ceremonies, including a strangely precocious-looking boy who gazes heavenward, tears beginning to flow as he is transported into a kind of hypnotic*

*liminal realm. Soon, the worshippers begins to chant Alu Akbar ("God is Great") in unison with the singer, many rising to their feet, swaying back and forth as if possessed or inspired by some divine force. Registering the ever-increasing intensity of this ecstatic ambience, the camera trembles as it attempts to survey the scene. Its gaze eventually becomes so delirious that human figures dissolve altogether, leaving us with a kind of radiant, abstract hallucination pulsating to the call of the devotional love song.*

### 1. Introduction

The scene I have just recounted appears midway through *BAGHDAD IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER* (2003), Paul Chan's aleatory videographic portrait of everyday life in the Iraqi capitol taken on the eve of the U.S. invasion. The scene is one among many pieces of "unusable" footage taken by the artist while serving as a documentarian for the witness-bearing delegation sent to Iraq in late 2002 by the anti-sanctions group Voices in the Wilderness. Charged with creating images that would functionally communicate a political message to a U.S. public being goaded to war by the Bush administration, Chan found himself left with hours of cast-off videographic material that did not lend itself to any immediately instrumental pedagogical task. Yet by early 2003, as the efforts of not only Voices in the

Wilderness but the entire global network of antiwar activism proved ineffective in halting the U.S. invasion, Chan's excess footage came to appear in a different light, as a set of counter-memorial traces pertaining to a city whose destruction had already commenced.<sup>1</sup> At once mournful and ecstatic, the Sufi performance recounted above plays an exemplary role, both formally and thematically, in the articulation of a certain religiosity at work in *BAGHDAD* in particular and Chan's *oeuvre* as a whole. Irreducible to any traditional art-historical sense of iconographic interpretation, the problem of the religious, or more specifically, what I will call the *post-secular* will constitute a major concern of the present essay.

*BAGHDAD* is the second video in Chan's *Tin Drum Trilogy*, the title of which is drawn from Günter Grass's tale of a hunchback dwarf possessed since childhood by a

<sup>1</sup> See Chan's account of his collaboration with Voices in the Wilderness in George Baker, "An Interview With Paul Chan," *October* 123 (Winter 2008) p. 161. Appearing in a special "Antiwar Questionnaire" issue of *October*, this interview is an indispensable resource for reading the *Tin Drum Trilogy*. While religion is addressed in a few places, it does not receive a sustained treatment as an aesthetic or formal problem immanent to Chan's work. In a short prefiguration of the argument elaborated in the present article, I argue that Chan's work is most productively approached through the lens of the "post-secular" in "Antiwar Questionnaire Response," *October* 123 (Winter 2008), pp. 110-115.



RE: THE\_OPERATION, 2002

compulsion to strike a tin drum. Asked by an interviewer about the title's literary allusion, Chan stated, "[The videos] all move in a rhythm of desperate noise. Oskar...was the little boy who drummed. And no one knew why...They just knew that he drummed. And it was annoying, and prescient, and repetitive, and rhythmic, sometimes artful, oftentimes full of rage. The room temperature of the times."<sup>2</sup> Chan's *Trilogy* displaces Oskar's endless percussive imperative from the disastrous world-historical conjuncture of Nazi Germany to that of the post-9/11 United States. The first installation of the *Trilogy* is *RE:THE\_OPERATION* (2002), which combines low-tech digital animation and enigmatic photographic snapshots in conjuring up the imagined epistolary reveries of the Bush cabinet had its members gone to fight on the front lines of the war in Afghanistan. Completing the trilogy is *Now promise now threat* (2004), which, produced in the aftermath of the 2004 U.S. presidential elections, intersperses documentary images of the contested political climate of Omaha, Nebraska with phantasmagoric evocations of the Iraq war.

*RE:THE\_OPERATION* has been thoroughly addressed by various critics, who have analyzed this "spellbinding fever dream" of a video in terms of its strangely affecting digital reinvestment of the medium of drawing as well as its critically perverse imperative of "radical empathy" or "reckless

compassion" with the singular personages of the Bush administration.<sup>3</sup> In its delirious plays of color, light, and darkness, its attention to the tension between cinematic temporality and photographic stasis, its preference for heteroglossia over authorial univocality, and its tracing of the intersection of world history and the "private" realms of affect, intimacy, and desire, *RE:THE\_OPERATION* shares a number of formal strategies and philosophical concerns with its counterparts in Chan's trilogy. As a trilogy, the videos stage a heterodox revision

<sup>3</sup>This is especially the case with the concluding missive of Colin Powell, whose meditations on the politics of friendship (drawn by Chan from a text by Maurice Blanchot) movingly capture his strange status as the last hope of intellectual and ethical courage in the imagination of the antiwar movement before his agonized UN PowerPoint presentation of Fall 2002. On *RE:THE\_OPERATION*, see Deirdre Boyle, "Sleeping with the Enemy" in the current publication, Baker, "An Interview with Paul Chan," pp. 154-156, as well as Scott Rothkopf, "Embedded in the Culture" *Artforum* (Summer 2006), pp. 305-310. The latter is the first major synthetic overview of Chan's oeuvre. Along with accounts of his gallery-based digital animations and his poetically inflected activist projects such as the *People's Guide to the RNC*, Rothkopf's overview contains several insightful paragraphs on *RE:THE\_OPERATION*, and one on *BAGHDAD*, described as "Chan's most straightforward 'documentary'" albeit one constituted as an "aleatory compendium... injected with a level of beguiling ambiguity by overlaying it with patchy narration in five narratives, which casts the authority and coherence of his viewpoint into question." The "divergent local realities" of the Nebraska staged by *Now promise* are given only a token mention.

of "bringing the war home," to cite his interlocutor Martha Rosler's famous series of agitational photomontages, in which activist imperatives of political functionality and identification are set adrift into a set of hallucinatory reveries that, in Chan's words, "pose questions we don't even know how to ask yet."<sup>4</sup>

In the present text I will focus exclusively on *BAGHDAD* and *Now promise*, which echo one another as a pair of psychogeographical urban portraits, exposing the cities in question to the aleatory logic of the *derive* critically inherited by the Situationists from Surrealism: "a technique of transient passage through various ambiances."<sup>5</sup> These "ambient videos," as Chan describes them, are formally hybrid, inhabiting the genre of the documentary video while

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Rothkopf, "Embedded in the Culture," p. 310. With the work of Jacques Ranciere in mind, Chan uses this phrase in provocatively distinguishing between the instrumental realm of political strategy, calculation, and identification, on the one hand, and the realm of aesthetic "freedom" on the other. Far from a conservative sense of autonomy, for Chan aesthetic "freedom" is a matter of uncertainty, enigma, and derangement that does not resolve into a sense of self-present subjectivity, whether individual or collective. See Chan's discussion with Martha Rosler on this point in *Between Artists: Paul Chan and Martha Rosler* (New York: A.R.T. Press, 2006), pp. 42-44. Also see Baker, "An Interview with Paul Chan," p. 159.

<sup>5</sup> Guy Debord, "Theory of the Derive," in Ken Knabb, ed. *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: BOP, 1981), p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> Baker, "An Interview with Paul Chan," p. 154.



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putting pressure on the latter's basic terms of visual exposure and public truth-telling through various techniques of abstraction, montage and metaphorical drift. In this regard, they echo the essay-films of Chris Marker and Agnes Varda, to mention only a few neo-avant-garde figures that Chan has cited as influential for his work.<sup>6</sup> The two videos are experimental variations on the genre of the travelogue, acting as a set of diaristic audiovisual field-notes collected while visiting two cities that bear more than a coincidental world-historical relation to one another: the disaster zone of Baghdad, and Omaha, a supposedly exemplary site of "red state" mentality scorned by many liberals and leftists after the 2004 elections. While often operating in an ethnographic mode to document the everyday life in geographical and cultural sites alien to many of the likely viewers of Chan's work, the videos are also "auto-ethnographic" in the sense given the term by Catherine Russell: "the autoethnographic subject blurs the distinction between ethnographer and Other by...becoming a stranger in a strange land...the travelogue produces a complex otherness in the interstices of a fragmented "I" of the filmic, textual self. As the memory of the trip becomes enmeshed with historical processes and cultural differences, the filmic image becomes the site of a complex

relationship between 'I was there' and 'this is how it is'."<sup>7</sup>

Possessing a paradoxical audio-visual structure described by Chan as "the rhythm of desperate noise," both videos are decidedly *nonlinear*; this is the case both in the way their formal composition refuses any simple narrative or thematic coordination of beginning, middle, and end *and* in the way in which they throw the temporality of history out of joint, unsettling any stable relationship between a pre-war past, a war torn present, and a post-war future. As I will speculate in this text, the temporal disorder—both formal and world-historical—also occurs on another register as well. This is what Chan has described as his "religious turn": "after 2001...my antenna were more attuned to certain theological precepts and ideas. I would never have thought that in the twenty-first Century I would have to think about religion anew. But once I did, I realized how the religious infects everything."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Russell, "Autoethnography: Journeys of the Self" in *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), pp. 275-314. Russell's discussion is concerned primarily with video practices that self-reflexively investigate the genealogy of the filmmaker's own (often ethnically differentiated and/or hybridized) subject position, but she concludes with a consideration of Chris Marker's *Sans Soliel* insofar as the latter involves a constant interrogation of the artist's cultural alterity vis-a-vis the Japanese cultural milieu on which his film is focused.

<sup>8</sup> Baker, "An Interview With Paul Chan," p. 173.

## 2. A Religious Turn?

The religious dimension of the Chan's practice has only been cautiously alluded to, if not placed at a distance, by Chan's best critics to date. Scott Rothkopf, for instance, states that Chan's work calls out for "an almost scriptural reading," and mentions the "biblical windstorm" that sweeps across the "apocalyptic" landscape of the coloristically remarkable double-sided projection screen in *My birds...trash...the future* (2004).<sup>9</sup> More skeptically, George Baker writes in his discussion of Chan's gallery-based shadow projections that "some critics have been quick to associate [these works] with religious scenarios of the end of all things... With all the falling bodies, others have been just as quick to associate them with more secular and contemporary catastrophes, seeing the works as silent meditation on the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>."<sup>10</sup> Though Baker correctly resists an overhasty assimilation of Chan's work to a matter of iconographic or thematic content, his apparent circumvention of the religious dimension of Chan's work suggests a certain secularist anxiety that silences much contemporary criticism—a sense compounded by his unqualified reference to September 11<sup>th</sup> as a "secular catastrophe," which diminishes

<sup>9</sup> Rothkopf, "Embedded in the Culture," p. 308.

<sup>10</sup> George Baker, "The Image from Outside" in Massimiliano Gioni, ed. *Paul Chan: The Seven Lights* (London/New York: Serpentine/New Museum, 2007), pp. 5-6.

<sup>6</sup> See *Between Artists: Paul Chan and Martha Rosler*, p. 12-13, and Baker, "An Interview with Paul Chan," p. 162.



*Now promise now threat, 2005*

the religious inflection of both the attacks and the response to them by the Bush Administration.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, the problem of religion has returned with a vengeance to geopolitics, the public sphere, and critical theory in the decade following 9/11<sup>12</sup>, but no attempt has been made thus far to consider how contemporary art has or might respond to this historical conjuncture. This is in part because, as James Elkins has argued in his provocative but problematic book *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (2002), there has been a veritable art-historical taboo on considering any possible relation between religion and modern or postmodern art in general (with the exception of those artists working in a deliberately provocative manner to desanctify religious icons and figures in the manner of, say, Andres Serrano's infamous *Piss Christ*, a centerpiece of the so-called culture wars waged by religious conservatives against public funding of nontraditional artists).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> However, in his recent interview with Chan, Baker critically addresses the survival of the "sacred" in the work of Modernist figures dear to the artist such as Bataille and Pasolini. See Baker, "An Interview with Paul Chan," p. 174.

<sup>12</sup> See Susan Buck-Morss, *Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical Theory* (New York: Verso, 2003) and Hent De Vries and Richard Sullivan, eds. *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> The exemplary document of the sterile dialectic

Elkins observes that "an observer of the art world might well come to the conclusion that religious practice and religious ideas are not relevant to art unless they are treated with skepticism," stating axiomatically that "as a rule, successful contemporary fine art is thoroughly nonreligious...art that sets out to convey spiritual values goes against the grain of the history of modernism."<sup>14</sup> Though his impulse to "see if it is possible to adjust the existing discourses enough to make it possible to address both secular theorists and religionists who would consider themselves outside the artworld," is in one sense compelling, Elkins' reduction of religion to a question of "spiritual values" that might be "conveyed" by artworks is problematic in a number of ways.

That said, Elkins' observations about the non- or indeed anti-religiosity of "successful contemporary fine art" are in general quite germane, as borne out by a critical text that he does not cite but is in fact exemplary: Peter Burger's seminal *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974). Burger's book, which

of "transgression" and "faith" in pre-9/11 U.S. art is Alberta Arthurs and Glenn Wallach, eds. *Crossroads: Art and Religion in American Life* (New York: New Press, 2001). Of similar inspiration, albeit with a more cosmopolitan purview is S. Brent Plate, ed. *Religion, Art, and Visual Culture: A Cross-Cultural Reader* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> See James Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (New York; Routledge, 2002), p. 20.

provides the foundation for a great deal of contemporary art-historical scholarship, begins by citing Marx's demystification of religion as "the opium of the people" as the model for its own project of ideology-critique and self-conscious human emancipation: "Marx shows that ultimately religion stabilizes undesirable social conditions [and that] as consolation it immobilizes the forces making for change."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, religion as such is not even mentioned by Burger as a meaningful historical force, insofar as he assumes its putatively compensatory, escapist function to have been transferred to the realm of aesthetic ideology—what Herbert Marcuse called "affirmative culture" with the disenchanting march of capitalist development.

Chan challenges this teleology of secularization, staging a "return of religion" that asks whether the religious ever did or could be separated from social life, political practice, and artistic expression in the first place.<sup>16</sup> Another way to put this is that

<sup>15</sup> Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minnesota: 1984), pp. 6-7.

<sup>16</sup> See De Vries and Sullivan, eds. *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006). The latter contains Claude Lefort's classic essay "The Permanence of the Politico-Theological?" (1981) in which he asserts, "Despite all the changes that have occurred, the religious survives in the guise of new beliefs and new representations." Lefort goes on to suggest that, "The workings of the mechanisms of incarnation ensure the imbrications of religion and politics,



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Chan's work opens onto the problem of what John D. Caputo among others has called the *post-secular*, understood as a critical estrangement of Enlightenment claims to have definitively separated the theological from the political, legal, and artistic realms: "a suspicion about Enlightenment suspicion of religion."<sup>17</sup> This notion treats secularism not as the unmarked, rational *telos* of global modernization but rather as a contingent cultural and ideological formation in its own right that has come under great duress with the overt re-theologization of politics in recent years by Christian, Jewish, and Islamic extremists. Neither denouncing religious mobilizations *tout court* as backwards, nor relinquishing the critical spirit of the Enlightenment altogether, the notion of the post-secular makes two overlapping demands, the first anthropological, the second philosophical. First, departing from conceptions of religion as a backwards symptom or at least a personal belief to be exercised exclusively in the "private" domain, the notion of the post-secular requires that we take religion seriously as a locally specific, historically variable, and internally contested set of cultural practices that carry great social, political and psychic

even in arenas where we thought we were dealing with purely religious or purely profane practices or representations." p. 150.

<sup>17</sup> See John D. Caputo, "How the World Became Post-Secular" in *On Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 11.

weight in the mobilization of publics in the contemporary world.

Second, the notion of the post-secular is haunted by the ideologically opposed but historically proximate philosophical insights of Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt, who argued that the political—as distinguished from the *status quo* of everyday politics within a taken-for-granted procedural framework—is constituted by an appeal to a messianic or divine exception that cannot be reduced to the immanence of human rationality and law.<sup>18</sup>

As Caputo stresses, the post-secular as a philosophical stance is not anti-secular, and nor does it aim to unproblematically resurrect God as an absolute foundation for knowledge, society, or art. Yet, surviving the "death" announced by thinkers ranging from Kant to Marx to Nietzsche (and less distinguished contemporary intellectuals such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens<sup>19</sup>), God emerges a perpetual

<sup>18</sup> See Marc De Wilde, "Violence in the State of Exception: Reflections on Theologico-Political Motifs in Benjamin and Schmitt," in De Vries and Sullivan, eds. *Political Theologies*, pp. 188-199, and Kenneth Reinhard, Eric Santer, and Slavoj Žižek, *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> See Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, (Hachett Book Group, 2007) and Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, (Mariner Books, 2008).

enigma about the limits of the human itself, giving rise to what Caputo calls "religion without religion."

In considering Chan's work in light of this post-secular condition, it is crucial to emphasize that religion as an overt theme only emerges in a few places throughout Chan's *oeuvre*. But in these few instances, religion is treated as both an urgent cultural-political question in its own right, and an indirect cipher for a broader poetic impulse that informs Chan's work at the level of both thematic content and formal technique. This poetic impulse resonates closely with Caputo's suggestion that: "Religion is for the unhinged (which is to say for lovers). In religion, the time, time itself, is out of joint... The religious sense of life awakens when we lose our bearings and let go, when we find ourselves against something that knocks us off our hinges, something impossible vis-à-vis our limited potentialities."<sup>20</sup>

Chan's religious turn is undoubtedly risky, and has provided occasion for some critics to resort to an unreconstructed religious vocabulary in the manner warned against by George Baker, as when the curator Massimiliano Gioni writes, "That art, faith, and religion might share a healing power, an energy capable of opposing the pure chaos of violence, seems to be one of the recurrent

<sup>20</sup> John Caputo, *On Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2001).



*Now promise now threat, 2005*

elements in Chan's research."<sup>21</sup> Gioni attributes to the artist a desire to "construct a new language of symbols with which to articulate...a new sense of shared faith" in the face of the post-9/11 conjuncture. While cognizant of the dark and even traumatic dimension of Chan's work, Gioni's appeal to a "new language of symbols" and "shared faith" risks associating Chan with the compensatory neo-spiritualism of an artist such as Bill Viola, whose spectacular immersive video environments are claimed to transport viewers onto a transhistorical plane in which essential oppositions between birth and death, materiality and transcendence, particularity and universality are harmoniously resolved in an avowedly pan-religious project synthesizing elements of Christian mysticism, Zen Buddhism, and Sufi Islam.

Viola's work is a contemporary example of what Walter Benjamin once criticized as "theosophic aesthetics of the Romantics," in which "the unity of the material and transcendental object, which constitutes the paradox of the theological symbol, is distorted into a relationship between appearance and essence...As a symbolic construct, the beautiful is supposed to merge with the divine into an unbroken whole."<sup>22</sup> Rather than affirm the "theosophic

symbol," (as Gioni seems at risk of doing in his comments on Chan), Benjamin called for an avowal of its "paradoxical" status, ambivalently inscribed in the material and transcendental realms at one and the same time, each term contaminating one another in an undecideable fashion such that neither the material nor the transcendent, the finite nor the infinite, the corporeal nor the spiritual could remain secure or pure in its identity. According to Benjamin, theosophic aesthetics, or *theoaesthetics*, distorts this undecideable paradox by pretending to resolve its antinomous terms into a plenitudinous whole in which human subjectivity and the otherness of divine creation are collapsed. Against this approach to the artwork as a mere material vehicle of divine meaning—the symbol as traditionally conceived—Benjamin insisted on reading artworks as *allegorical* ciphers.

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*Tragic Drama*, cited in Mark C. Taylor, *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, and Religion* (University of Chicago, 1992). Significantly, this passage from Benjamin is central to the originary text of postmodern aesthetic theory—Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism, I" [1980] in *Beyond Recognition: Culture, Power, and Representation* (Berkeley: 1992), p. 65. While bearing an important philosophical affinity, Owens' text opens onto a much different sense of artistic postmodernism than does Taylor. While Owens championed avant-garde artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Martha Rosler, Taylor—a non-art-historian—celebrates formally regressive neo-expressionists such as Anselm Kiefer on the ground that they iconographically mark the trauma of the Holocaust, for instance.

Allegory, a term whose Greek etymology implies a certain "speaking through others,"<sup>23</sup> involves what Mark C. Taylor calls the "disfiguration" of any ideal aesthetic meaning, making the artwork a kind of theological ruin that calls out as a sensuous apparition to be deciphered while refusing hermeneutic access to any transcendental divinity.<sup>24</sup>

Benjamin's account of allegorical disfiguration is highly pertinent to Chan's work in general and the present pair of videos in particular, which devote passionate attention to the details and textures of urban existence in pre-war Baghdad and war-time Omaha, marking singular bodies and faces, sounds and gestures, object and spaces as enigmatic ciphers of world-historical catastrophe and redemption. Emphasizing an irreducible splitting, loss, and fragmentation against the "unbroken whole" of the traditional theosophic symbol, Benjamin's aesthetic theory prevents any simple resort to religious themes or iconography, a major risk when approaching Chan's work in terms of the post-secular.

<sup>21</sup> Massimiliano Gioni, "All is Fair in Love and War" in *Paul Chan: Seven Lights* (New York/London: New Museum/Serpentine, 2007), p. 76.

<sup>22</sup> See Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German*

<sup>23</sup> As Owens remarks, in the hands of the allegorist, "the image becomes something other (*allos*=other + *agoreuei* = to speak). He does not restore an original meaning that has been lost or obscured: allegory is not hermeneutics." "The Allegorical Impulse," p. 54.

<sup>24</sup> See Taylor, *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, and Religion* (University of Chicago, 1992).

In a much later text concerned with Modern rather than Baroque art, Benjamin implicitly reactivated the problems of theology and allegory in relation to Surrealism with the concept of “profane illumination.”<sup>25</sup> Benjamin developed this phrase in attempting to come to terms with the simultaneously compelling and dangerous fascination of the Surrealists with mystical, occult, and otherwise “phantasmagoric” phenomena in the face of capitalist and fascist barbarism during the nineteen twenties and thirties, including the French colonial war in Morocco.

Benjamin insisted on severing Surrealist cultural explorations from “the humid back door of spiritualism,” while strategically re-articulating the movement’s oft-celebrated drug-induced reveries with a critical reconsideration of the Marxist diagnosis of religion as “the opiate of the people”: “The true creative overcoming of religious illusion certainly does not lie in narcotics. It resides in a profane illumination, a materialistic anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give only an introductory lesson.”<sup>26</sup> While anthropological—and thus pertaining to the activities of “man” in the everyday world rather than a timeless divine realm—profane illumination is also a matter of “inspiration,” a term which suggests an encounter with something other than or beyond the mundane world of man. In a remark that could easily be addressed by Chan to contemporary theo-aesthetic impulses in contemporary art, Benjamin argues that a “fanatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious only takes us no further. We penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday.”<sup>27</sup> For the surrealists, the privileged locus of such a dialectical optic

was the city of Paris, where the outmoded remains and fragments of 19th Century were reinvested, re-encharmed with an uncanny power. Significantly, Benjamin describes this surrealist urbanism in terms of physiognomy—“no face is as surrealistic in the same degree as the true face of a city.”<sup>28</sup>

Benjamin’s insistence that the “true face” of a city can only be revealed surrealistically, which is to say, by “making the everyday impenetrable and the impenetrable everyday,” resonates closely with Chan’s unorthodox reworking of the documentary genre in his approach to Baghdad and Omaha. Possessed by a kind of mad love, to cite the title of Andre Breton’s own photonovelistic *derive* of Paris<sup>29</sup>, Chan deranges the parameters of documentary veracity, composing surrealist love-songs to the cities in question that affirm Benjamin’s assertion that “one need only take love seriously to recognize in it too a profane illumination.”<sup>30</sup> The amorous logic of Chan’s urban portraiture involves a complex metonymic relay between the faces of singular urban inhabitants, the visual and acoustic texture of the urban environments in which they dwell, and the world-historical forces to which both are exposed.

Chan’s attraction to what the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas calls the “face of the other” arguably constitutes the aesthetic and ethical crux of his turn to religion, which approximates Caputo’s post-secular imperative to “to rethink the religious in terms of our obligation to the other...and to rethink God, not by way of a renewed experience of the truth of Being, but by getting beyond the anonymity of Being and experiencing the God whose withdrawal from the world leaves a divine trace on the face of the stranger.”<sup>31</sup> However, Chan is also attuned to the point made more recently by Judith Butler in her discussion of the affective boundary

drawn in mainstream U.S. media between the “grievable” deaths of Americans and the “ungrievable” deaths of Iraqis that for Levinas, the face of the other is irreducible to the literal countenance of another person (though the latter can be one crucial site for the ethical encounter): “there is a ‘face’ which no face can exhaust, the face understood as human suffering, as the cry of human suffering, which can take no direct representation. Here the face is always a figure for something that is not literally a face...In this sense the figure underscores the incommensurability of the face with whatever it represents.”<sup>32</sup> Locating a certain divine imperative in the representational incommensurability described by Butler, Chan’s allegorical techniques evoke the face of the other at the border between figuration and abstraction, visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, affectively implicating viewers in the lives and deaths of strangers without transforming the latter into objects of depoliticized sentimentality.

### 3. BAGHDAD IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER

Every moment of Chan’s two videos flashes with the allegorical force of profane illumination described by Benjamin, which makes the task of descriptive analysis a somewhat overwhelming one for the critic. Thus, in what follows, I will recount in nonlinear fashion only a few of the most powerful moments in *BAGHDAD* and *Now promise now threat*. In both videos, the specifically religious dimension of Chan’s post-secular vision emerges with varying levels of explicitness. Yet as I’ve already suggested, these isolated moments can be understood, speculatively, as interpretative keys to the videos as a whole, contaminating other scenes, sounds, and figures that appear to reside in the everyday world with a sense of allegorical if not theological mystery that suspends vision between illumination and darkness, memory and oblivion, the mundane and the sacred. Chan stages these evocations with a remarkable play between speech, sound, silence, noise, and music that bears more than a supplementary relationship to the play of videographic flow

<sup>25</sup> “Surrealism” in *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jecott (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), p. 17. Kate Khatib explicitly attempts to draw out the theological dimension of this text in “Automatic Theologies: Surrealism and the Politics of Equality,” in De Vries and Sullivan, eds. *Political Theologies*, pp. 617-631.

<sup>26</sup> Benjamin, “Surrealism,” p. 179.

<sup>27</sup> Benjamin, “Surrealism,” p. 190.

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin, “Surrealism,” p. 182.

<sup>29</sup> See Andre Breton, *Mad Love*, trans. Mary-Ann Caws, (University of Nebraska Press, 1985).

<sup>30</sup> Benjamin, “Surrealism,” p. 190.

<sup>31</sup> John Caputo, introduction to Emmanuel Levinas, “Diachrony and Representation” in Caputo, ed. *The Religious* (London: Blackwell, 2000), p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (New York: Verso, 2004), p. 144.



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and photographic stasis that make up the visual (non)composition.

Indeed, *BAGHDAD* opens with a close-up of an older woman's mouth singing softly in untranslated Arabic, thus inaugurating the video with a sense of being acoustically addressed by the sound of a voice that is irreducible to an immediately comprehensible communicative message. From this the video cuts to a long fixed-shot of the Palestine Hotel in downtown Baghdad at sunset, known as the place of residence for expatriates and journalists during the period of the Sanctions. We are then addressed by a female voice speaking in French, the first of five randomly alternating languages in which the video's occasional and elliptical voice-over is delivered: "On the left, the Palestine Hotel. There's a hole on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor now. To the right: the sun, incredulous." We are thus positioned as tourists of sorts, and the voice-over at first seems as if it will serve to guide and orient us vis-à-vis the unfamiliar urban landscape. But the second sentence disjoins our sense of temporality, speaking to a destructive event—the bombing of downtown Baghdad during the U.S. "Shock and Awe" campaign—that will already have occurred at the time of the image's circulation—thus giving us the sense of witnessing a ruin-in-advance. That the present-tense reference to the damaged building is something other than a mere statement of factual information is signaled by the speaker's subsequent hallucinatory anthropomorphization of the setting sun as a

subject of a kind of gaze, as if it were a silent witness to the passing-away of the present.

While the voice-over is arguably the only structural or compositional feature that joins the otherwise aleatory audio-visual elements of the video, it by no means functions as the omniscient authorial voice of standard documentary. Indeed, the voice stages a heterogeneous range of forms of address that throws the identity and position of the speaker and the listener into perpetually uncertain relations. Ranging from direct questions, to philosophical fragments, poetic ruminations, and semi-narrative diaristic fragments involving a minimal first-person "I," the voice not only addresses the audience, but also, in several cases, the subjects—human and otherwise—that appear and speak in the video itself.

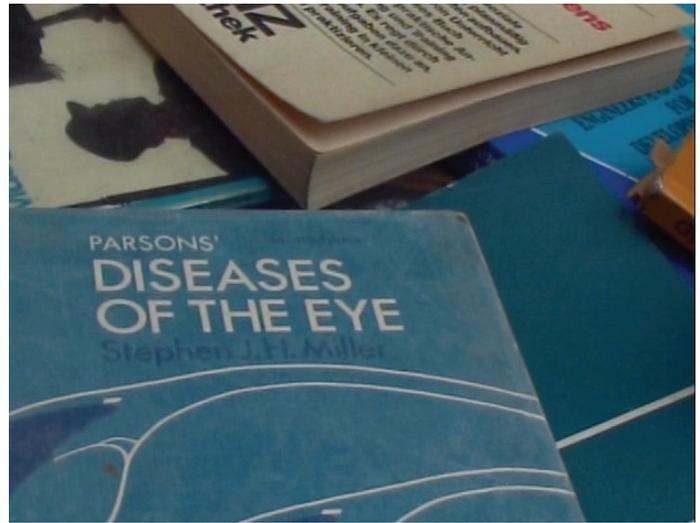
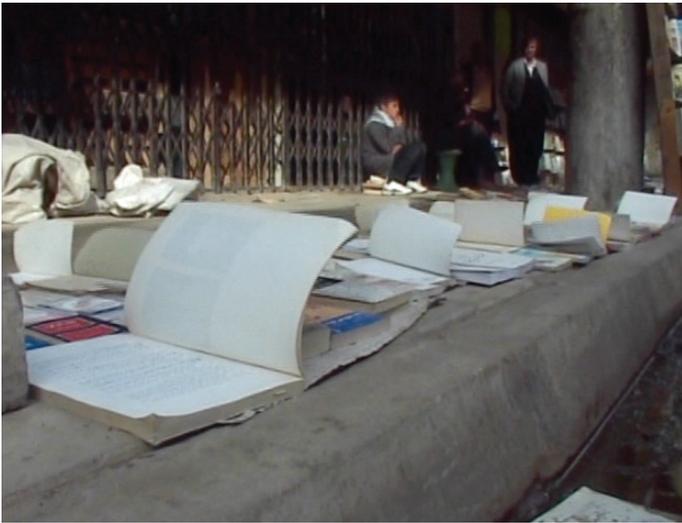
A key moment in this regard occurs in the first sustained scene of the video, which portrays a vendor of cast-off books displaying his wares on the sidewalk of a Baghdad market—an echo of the Parisian flea market in *Mad Love*, the privileged site of Breton's "magical-circumstantial" encounters with the outmoded cultural detritus he hoped to redeem for its unforeseen erotic, mnemonic, and political possibilities.<sup>33</sup> "Have a look... Have a look...Have a look" incants a young

<sup>33</sup> See Andre Breton, *Mad Love*, trans. Mary-Ann Caws, (University of Nebraska Press, 1985), and Hal Foster's reading of the text in *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 37-41.

boy in a Puma hat as he gestures to lines and heaps of tattered books spread out for sale. As if to gently index the coming of some catastrophic tempest or divine intervention, the pages of the books are set aflutter by an invisible wind that blows across the urban landscape—a meteorological trope akin to Benjamin's "storm of progress"<sup>34</sup> that recurs throughout Chan's oeuvre and which is explicitly evoked in the remarkable set of "online footnotes" to *BAGHDAD* provided at the artist's website.<sup>35</sup> Responding to the boy's call, the camera focuses in on a few disparate, worn titles in European languages

<sup>34</sup> George Baker makes this important observation apropos *My birds...trash...the future* (2004), associating it with Benjamin's "storm of progress" and Blanchot's "four winds" in *Writing of the Disaster* in "Paul Chan: The Image from Outside," p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> At Chan's website [www.nationalphilistine.com/baghdad](http://www.nationalphilistine.com/baghdad), we read the following entry for "Books, Flapping": "Former engineers sell their collection of books on statistical analysis here and whatever else they can find in their house. Books are indiscriminately piled on the sidewalk for people to browse through. Iraq had, before the sanctions, one of the highest literacy rates in the Middle East and the largest number of PhD's. This is why you will find not only books on mathematics and structural mechanics, but also Hegelian philosophy, Pop Art, and Modern absurdist drama, in Arabic, English, French, German, and even Chinese...When the wind blows down through the street, the dilapidated books on the ground come alive and begin to fly. The poets and tea sellers and the scores of readers who come to peruse and gossip notice. But street magic like this is not unusual in Baghdad. They pay their respects to this magic by smiling, and move on."



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as other passersby peruse the offerings—*Kon-Tiki*, *Topics in Electrical Engineering*, and, significantly, *Marshall's Diseases of the Eye*—before cutting to a close-up of the boy himself, who poses awkwardly for a few seconds and then winks coyly at the camera before shaking his head and saying “no” in English. In response to this ambivalent exchange of gazes, the female voice-over, again in French, says “sorry,” simultaneously marking the dimension of voyeuristic pleasure taken by viewers in lingering on the boy’s face and acknowledging the boy’s gesture of refusal—an ethical technique of self-reflexivity on Chan’s part that avows the risk of violence inherent in any project of documentary representation. From the face of the boy, the camera moves to the face of the elderly kaffiyeh-clad proprietor of the bookstall, identified as Noman, who lists a roster of his favorite Western poets from T.S. Eliot to Federico Garcia-Lorca before reciting several stanzas of an Arabic poem. Echoing the title of the otherwise mundane medical textbook coincidentally appearing among his wares, the book-dealer is evidently afflicted by a “disorder of the eye,” his eyes slightly welling up as he recites a poetic address to a lost lover, “I leaned on the branch of the tree as the tears kept flowing from my eyes.”<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> See Chan’s brief description of Noman—a poet in his own right—in the online footnote labeled “December 28, 2002: Portrait of a Day in Baghdad” at <http://www.nationalphilistine.com/baghdad/text/portrait.html>.

As *BAGHDAD* proceeds, documentary itself emerges as a kind of “disease of the eye,” a genre whose promise lies less in any simple optical or cognitive revelation than in a certain kind of ethical weeping in the simultaneous radiance and obscurity of the face of the Other in the Levinasian sense of the term.

From the booksellers’ spontaneous moment of affect in the public space of the market, the video cuts to the private space of what appears to be a lower-middle class domestic interior. The voiceover directly addresses the audience, “Do you want to see some dancing?” Two twin girls grimace and dance somewhat flirtatiously for the camera to the background sound of an Arabic pop song (one of the many moments of ambient musicality referred to above). As in the case of the boy in market, the shot lingers for an uncomfortably long time on the faces of the girls before an intertitle informs us that it is the girls’ brother who is behind the camera—a gesture of authorial decentering on Chan’s part that simultaneously neutralizes and intensifies the sense of amorous attraction between camera and its subjects, which is at once compelling and disturbing. Even as it suggests a sincere ethical concern with documenting for a U.S. audience the precarious normality of everyday life for otherwise anonymous Iraqis, this scene undeniably evokes an anxiety about the objectifying logic of documentary, often associated with a certain dehumanization of

the very humans the genre would claim to render visible, if not dignify.

Marking the conjugation of filmic scopophilia and zoology that has recurred throughout the history of experimental ethnography<sup>37</sup>, from the scene of the girls dancing *BAGHDAD* moves us to the inhuman face of a monkey asleep in a cage. “What do monkeys dream?” asks the voiceover in Spanish, whispering gently as if not to wake the dormant animal about which it inquires. Our gaze is trained on the material traits of the monkeys’ physiognomy, detailing the uncannily familiar grimaces that come over the animal as it sleeps behind the gridded bars of its cage. The creature’s facial expressions appear to register an internal agitation or perhaps nightmare, a psychic disturbance that remains barred to deciphering—“dreaming of peace (or war),” as Chan puts it in his footnotes.<sup>38</sup> Despite

<sup>37</sup> See Catherine Russel, “Zoology, Pornography, Ethnography” in *Experimental Ethnography*, pp. 119-155. Russel’s chapter is remarkably resonant with the problems staged by Chan’s scene of the monkey, especially in its discussion of Bill Viola’s *I Do Not Know What it Is That I Am Like* (1986), which consists of close-up shots of the eyes of animals in a zoo, and the Ray Birdswhistell’s *Microcultural Incidents at Ten Zoos* (1969), which observes the behavioral idiosyncrasies of zoo audiences in ten countries around the world.

<sup>38</sup> See the footnote “Monkey dreaming of peace (or war)” at [www.nationalphilistine.com/baghdad/monkey/monkey.html](http://www.nationalphilistine.com/baghdad/monkey/monkey.html). In his *October* interview with George Baker, Chan remarks that

the tenderness of the whisper, the creature awakens with a broad yawn and sleepy yet piercing eyes. "Good morning, Coffee" responds the voiceover. Coffee faces us with neither a flash of intersubjective recognition nor bestial brutality, but rather an abysmal enigma—a "black hole" as Chan describes it—in which desire and anxiety, human and inhuman, anthropological and zoological are inextricably intertwined. The monkey thus functions as a kind of allegory for the disaster-to-come of Baghdad itself, in which, to use the terms of Giorgio Agamben, the lives of Iraqis will have been reduced to *zoe*—bare creaturely life regarded as expendable and beyond legal or religious sanctification—by U.S. and Al Qaeda forces alike, severed from *bios* and the sense of a shared form-of-life this implies.<sup>39</sup>

In an associative *derive*, Chan moves us from Coffee the monkey to the ambient buzz of a Baghdad coffee-house, the *locus classicus* of the public sphere as theorized by Jurgen Habermas in his indispensable but problematic Enlightenment model of civic association and discourse. The ambulatory camera scans the scene, passing over dozens of Iraqi men as they converse, fraternize, and debate over newspapers, dishes of coffee, and hookah pipes, creating a vivaciously noisy ambience. At one point the camera pauses momentarily on one particular man in a kafiyeh, who interrupts his conversation and remarks, "hey man, I see you looking at me!" Rather than an uncomfortable moment of ethnographic refusal as with the boy in the market, the man's gesture of scopic reciprocity is

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this is "the most important image in the video": "I still don't know what it is. You look at things and they don't make sense...this image doesn't make sense to me. Imagine being in Baghdad in a hotel lobby, seeing a monkey sleeping in a cage with his eyes darting back and forth, the telltale sign of dreaming. And knowing that the monkey has been there for four years, trapped. And now it is waiting for war. It is all of these things, compressed into an image. It becomes a kind of black hole," p. 221.

<sup>39</sup> See the chapters "Homo Sacer," and "Life that Does Not Deserve to Live," in Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford University, 1998), trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, pp. 71-80, 136-143 and Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford University Press, 2002), trans. Kevin Attell.

strangely casual, as if shooing away an old—if bothersome—friend.

The camera turns around and films a white woman and an Asian man also holding a still camera; just as these two figures appear in the frame, the flash of that camera illuminates; yet at the moment of illumination, the entire screen flashes into white for a two-second interval; an image emerges from the flash gradually, like a photograph developing on light-sensitive paper. And indeed, rather than simply resume the continuous flow of the video footage, what shows up *is* a still photograph, the very one whose flash had temporarily blinded us with its illumination. It shows an Iraqi man in the coffeehouse equipped with a video camera, frozen and immobilized. He is identified by an intertitle as Abdul Masjid, a former television producer who is experimenting with a cutting-edge video camera that has temporarily been handed over to him by the artist. Again, here we witness Chan's ethical technique of authorial decentering, in which we are enjoined to imaginatively participate in a provisional sharing of perceptual positionality with those typically situated on the other side of the camera. However, any pretension to straightforward identification is disrupted by the flash of the camera, which blinds even as it illuminates, preserving the image of Masjid even while subjecting him to a kind of immobilization or mortification. (This paradoxical quality of the photographic still will return several times later in *BAGHDAD* as the counterpoint to the durational flow of video footage—a problem inherited by Chan from Chris Marker's *La Jétte*). Further, the sense of distancing and doubling created by Chan's temporary relinquishing of authority compounds the uncertainty surrounding the address made to the camera by the man in the *kaffiyeh*—"Hey man, I see you looking at me!" In other words, this address was not intended for either the artist or us, the eventual audience of the video, but it has nevertheless been detoured and re-directed to "us." We are caught in the gaze of this anonymous other, subjecting us to a kind of interpellation—the "hey, you there!" famously evoked by Louis Althusser<sup>40</sup>—that calls into

<sup>40</sup> Althusser's famous scenario of interpellation

question any sovereign distance on the part of the viewer, any pretension to exist outside or beyond the historical situation of Baghdad, whether in 2002 or in the present.

This sense of simultaneous historical distance and proximity—especially for a Western art audience—is compounded as the camera focuses on a seated man engaged in an apparently heated discussion with his peers at the coffeehouse. The voice-over informs us: "That's Haider. He's a sculptor complaining about the state of the art market," going on to explain that Baghdad had one of the most vibrant art markets in the Middle East, due in no small part to the demand created by aid workers over the course of the Sanctions. We then see a series of artworks, each coupled by the voice-over with the name of a modern Western artist from Alberto Giacometti to Phillip Guston. In some cases, it is ambiguous as to whether the artwork featured pertains to the artist in question or an Iraqi artist, while others are more deliberately disjunctive. The name "Chuck Close" for instance, is coupled with a relatively traditional portrait of a somber-looking Iraqi woman wearing *hijab*. (Significantly, this portrait was among the images wheat pasted around New York City by Chan as part of his *Baghdad Snapshot Project* in the months preceding the 2003 invasion.)<sup>41</sup>

*BAGHDAD* moves in and out of various kinds of everyday spaces in both the architectural and psychic sense—market, domestic interior, coffeehouse—while eroding any firm boundaries between private affect and public reason, theological illumination and worldly observation. Following the paradigmatically secular space of the coffeehouse, Chan explores yet another space of everyday life in Baghdad,

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is of a police officer "hailing" the anonymous man in the street—"hey you there"—to which the he turns around in response despite the anonymity of the address. See Thomas Keenan, *Fables of Responsibility: Aberrations and Predicaments in Ethics and Politics* (Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 23-27.

<sup>41</sup> For an account of the *Baghdad Snapshot Project*, see Chan's footnote at <http://www.nationalphilistine.com/baghdad/snapshots/index.html>.

this time an overtly religious one.

This vignette begins with a meditative shot of an elderly Iraqi woman, apparently taken unawares. Her identity as a nun becomes apparent as we recognize the ambient sound as a Christian hymnal whose refrain is the word “hallelujah” sung by a children’s choir in Arabic. Whispering to herself the words of the hymn with an almost indiscernibly slight movement of her lips, the nun, though quietly dignified, seems to be on the verge of tears; these are tears not of joy but of an enigmatic mourning, as if the sonorous voices of the children were raised in memory of a future loss rather than the auspicious arrival of the savior otherwise marked inside the church by a Christmas tree and a child dressed in pageant costume as a donkey of the manger.

Though already rendered enigmatic by the traces of sorrow evident in her face, the relative cultural familiarity of the Christian nun is withdrawn as the voice-over states “Here is a Sufi poem,” introducing the scene of ecstatic religiosity described in the introduction to this paper. There, Chan’s video camera undergoes a kind of metamorphosis from an instrument of documentary presentation to an interface of trance-like inspiration, recalling the neo-Surrealist experiments undertaken by French ethnographer Jean Rouch in the 1950s and 60s.<sup>42</sup> While in this scene

<sup>42</sup> See Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*. Along with pioneering the neo-avant-garde discourse of *vérité*, Rouch was a key figure in the post-war genealogy of ethnographic surrealism, which looked to cultural alterity as site of estrangement from the everyday world of Western modernity in which the Cartesian subject would be dissolved into a utopian kind of religio-poetic madness. Chan’s attention to the prayers and tears of the Sufi ritual flirts with this legacy, and thus risks a certain kind of Orientalism. Indeed, for many left-liberals in the West—including many Muslims themselves—Sufism is among the only acceptable if not desirable forms of Islam, a tendency only bolstered by the fact that fundamentalist Wahabbism regards Sufism as heretical. The latter has a long history of appropriations by the Western avant-garde as exemplified in the work of Chan’s friend and interlocutor Peter Lamborn Wilson aka Hakim Bey. My point here is not so much to criticize this scene in Chan’s video, but to suggest the need for vigilance about assuming or requiring Islam and Muslims to take the critical or exotic forms

Chan flirts in a potentially dangerous way with the desublimatory powers of religio-poetic derangement celebrated by Rouch as an antidote to the rationalism of Western modernity, it is an undeniably powerful moment in *BAGHDAD* in which the “prayers and tears” of the religious domain exposes the human form to a kind of radiant disfiguration that blinds us in its intensity. This scene emblemizes the challenge presented by Chan’s work to the notion of religion-as-ideology inherited by many left-oriented artists and critics from Marx: “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.... The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo.... The criticism of religion disillusion man, so that he will think, act, and fashion his reality like a man who has discarded his illusions and regained his senses, so that he will move around himself as his own true Sun. Religion is only the illusory Sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself.”<sup>43</sup> Much avant-garde cultural production has taken this passage as a starting-off point (though rarely is religion as such even acknowledged as a contemporary world-historical force at all), aiming to “disillusion” humanity so as to restore its proper place as the rational center of its own destiny. Significantly, this disillusionment is associated with a kind of solar illumination, an awakening from the darkness of ideological backwardness and a clarification of eyes otherwise rendered blurry if not blind by the flowing of tears.

The Sufi scene is an exemplary moment in Chan’s post-secular vision, in which the eye is not treated as an organ of cognitive mastery, forward-thinking projection, or critical self-reflexivity for a self-possessed subject. It is rather a site of affectation and susceptibility vis-à-vis an unrepresentable,

most valorized by the West.

<sup>43</sup> Karl Marx, “Contributions to a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right” in Robert Tucker, ed. *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1975), cited in Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minnesota 1984), pp. 6-7.

divine otherness that brings us to tears and prayers—an affective state that is denied a place in the rationalist models of human consciousness and sociopolitical life that continue to inform many models of artistic criticality. By contrast to the latter, Chan’s work is more attuned to Jacques Derrida’s suggestion that the weeping eye is central to the structure of visibility itself: “Now if tears come to the eyes, if they well up in them, and if they can also veil sight, perhaps they reveal, in the very course of this experience, in the coursing of water, the essence of the eye...the eye would not be destined to see but to weep. For at the moment that they veil sight, tears would unveil what is proper to the eye.”<sup>44</sup>

Chan’s embrace of a certain blurring of vision, or indeed blindness, as the ethical motivation of his practice is stated programmatically in the section of *Baghdad* following the Sufi scene, which at first seems to be a kind of post-ecstatic sobering-up. “I spend the next day taking pictures,” says the voiceover, as a series of snapshots of random details in a dingy hotel room apparently belonging to the artist flash into visibility and then fade away into white, echoing the moment in the coffeehouse with Abdul Masjid. As the images move from random details to spontaneous snapshots of various Iraqis posing and grimacing for the camera—some of which are archived in the artist’s online footnotes under the heading “This is the Baghdad You Destroyed”<sup>45</sup>—the voice-over states “I miss much of what is understandable. Sometimes it’s not so important to see, to compose. Every time they trust me enough to stare it is because I’m blind. And I submit to blindness because it is the prerequisite to clairvoyance.” As this ethical maxim is being articulated, we see a frontal view of the video camera with its viewfinder screen inverted so as to show us the footage it has recorded—including the face of the boy from the market. Chan’s continuous attention to both the technical

<sup>44</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: the Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (University of Chicago, 1993), p. 126.

<sup>45</sup> “This is the Baghdad You Destroyed” at <http://www.nationalphilistine.com/baghdad/baghdad/index.html>



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and formal means of representation is a signature avant-garde technique stretching back to Vertov, but here it becomes a matter not of dialectical self awareness but rather ethical self-questioning along the lines of Russell's account of "autoethnography," which "produces a complex, an otherness in the interstices of a fragmented 'I' of the filmic, textual self."<sup>46</sup>

This attention to media and mediums is not limited to photography and video alone; in a remarkable scene following the series of photographic stills, we are returned to a domestic interior, in which Chan focuses on an affable older man named Safar who addresses the camera in heavily accented English, "You need a sheik? I'm a sheik." Activating a strangely shared cosmopolitan horizon based in U.S. popular music (a recurrent trope of simultaneous cultural recognition and uncanniness throughout the video) the sheik then proceeds to offer his rendition of the jazz tune "She's a Lady," provoking gleeful laughter from family and friends sitting off-camera. The sheik then proceeds to sketch what appears to be a self-portrait on a small notebook, gradually tracing out the figure of a bearded face similar to his own.<sup>47</sup>

In this scene, Chan arguably recodes the entire video as a matter of *drawing*, of the portrait or self-portrait that consists of the graphic inscription of traces or traits in the moment of blindness when the tip of the mark-making instrument touches the receptive surface of the paper. As Derrida writes in *Memoirs of the Blind: the Self Portrait and Other Ruins*, "it is as if seeing were forbidden in order to draw, as if one drew only on the condition of not seeing, as if the drawing were a declaration of love destined for or suited to the invisibility of the other—unless it were in fact born from seeing the other withdrawn from sight." Derrida goes on to describe the (self) portrait as a kind of ruin-in-reverse: "In the beginning there is ruin. Ruin is that what happens to the image from the moment of the first gaze. Ruin is the self-portrait, this face looked at in the face of the memory of itself... the figure, the face then sees its visibility being eaten away."<sup>48</sup> Derrida's account of the portrait in its concurrent movement of preservation and destruction, appearance and disappearance, memory and oblivion, speaks not only to the simultaneous self-inscription and self-effacement enacted by the sheik in his performance for the camera, but also the disjointed temporality of *BAGHDAD* itself.

From the exemplary self-portrait of the sheik, the video moves to a set of children's drawings of dancers and flowers,

accompanied by the following voice-over: "the unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form, she tells me." Paraphrasing Adorno, this self-expository theoretical statement is attributed to the maker of the drawings, again soliciting a kind of impossible imaginary identification with the subjects of the video.

Over the remainder of the video, Chan's camera drifts through a range of other everyday scenarios including a wedding party spilling noisily out into the street from a banquet hall, an agonizing but strangely moving performance by a novice vocalist at an Iraqi nightclub, a teenage girl showcasing a scrapbook of her favorite Western and Arabic pop stars, and a Baath Party rally in which the members of a female militia corps deliver a discontinuous and laughter-ridden recitation of a pro-Sadaam anthem with their Kalashnikovs in the air while the shadows of marching soldiers are cast onto the pavement beside them (the latter detail prefiguring Chan's current mobilization of the indexical logic of the shadow in his gallery-based light-projection projects).<sup>49</sup> In each scene, musical material is mobilized by Chan in conjuring the precarious normality and familiarity of everyday life on the brink of the 2003 invasion; yet it also insists on reminding us of the fact that quotidian urban

<sup>46</sup> Catherine Russell, "Auto-Ethnography: Journeys of the Self," p. 275.

<sup>47</sup> See Chan's footnote, "Drawings" at <http://www.nationalphilistine.com/baghdad/drawings/drawing00.html>

<sup>48</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, p. 68.

<sup>49</sup> See Baker's discussion of Chan's shadow-projections in relation to Duchamp's *Tu m'* (1918) in "Paul Chan: The Image From the Outside," p. 10.

existence in Baghdad was *already* marked by the violence of both the first Gulf War and the ensuing sanctions imposed on the Iraqi people by the U.S. and the UN. Indeed, the organization with which Chan traveled, Voices in the Wilderness, had dedicated itself over the course of the past decade to ending the sanctions and publicizing their devastating effects on the biopolitical conditions of the country.<sup>50</sup>

Among the most affecting scene of *BAGHDAD* involves material shot at Al-Amirya, a subterranean civilian bomb-shelter attacked by U.S. warplanes in 1991 in which more than 400 women and children were killed. Photographic portraits of each victim were erected in the remains of the shelter-cum-crypt, which became a crucial place of memorial witness bearing for anti-sanctions activists in between the two invasions. With the faint sound of activists singing the civil rights-era Christian spiritual "This Little Light of Mine" echoing through the cavernous memorial site, Chan's camera zooms ultra-close onto a series of the portraits one-by-one. Rather than register as fully recognizable human figures, the faces of the dead blur and distort into a set of barely legible ghostly traces, recalling the technique of effaced portraiture employed by Gerhard Richter in his Baader-Meinhof series or Christian Boltanski in his Holocaust-related installations. At several points, the eyes of the otherwise frozen, photographically preserved faces *blink* at the viewer, returning to life before our own eyes as an unsettling afterimage of the boy in the market who similarly winked at the camera near the beginning of the video. In an almost imperceptible act of temporal derangement, Chan insists that we ourselves are exposed to the photographically reanimated gaze of the dead, that their spectral absence haunts our own spectatorial present.

From the opening scenes of the untranslated song and the electronically broadcast call to prayer, to the Christmas hymn and

the Sufi poem, to the sheik's rendering of "She's a Lady" and the cryptic echoes of Al-Amirya, by far the most remarkable moment of musicality in *BAGHDAD* involves a haunting rendition of Whitney Houston's "I Will Always Love You" by the Syrian pop star Mayyada Bselees. Aired ubiquitously across Iraq by Sadaam Hussein as the theme song to his so-called reelection campaign in 2002, Chan recorded the song while in a taxi traveling across a desolate Iraqi landscape marked only by the oil tankers that pass the camera on either side. Set against the monochromatic expanse of the desert, Chan redeems the song from its instrumentalization in Hussein's imaginary of totalitarian sovereignty,<sup>51</sup> transfiguring it into a kind of devotional love song to the city whose traces survive in the videographic archive of *BAGHDAD* itself.

Chan's evocation of the desert is significant from a post-secular perspective insofar as it is the privileged space in the Bible for the encounter between the human and the divine. According to Taylor, modernist abstraction sought to achieve something like this in its "deserting" of figuration, a stance that still assumed the possibility of accessing the divine in a transcendental fashion. But in the aftermath of secularization—the so-called death of god—the desert—and its counterpart in artistic abstraction—are no longer sites of theoaesthetic presence and totality, but rather a kind of evacuation, withdrawal, or *desertion*. Citing Jean-Luc Nancy, Taylor writes, "Our experience of the divine is our experience of desertion. It is no longer a question of meeting God in the desert; but of this—and this *is the desert*—we do not encounter god, god has deserted all encounter."<sup>52</sup> Yet according to Nancy, this movement of desertion does not simply overcome God in the name of a humanity immanent to itself; the divine remains or survives precisely in its abandonment, leaving us to read the ciphers left behind in its wake.

Chan's re-recording of "I Will Always Love You" mobilizes the profane materials of the transnational culture industry as a medium of sacred ethical exchange speaks to past and future simultaneously, calling us to bear witness to a disaster that has always already happened, a disaster to which we as viewers can only arrive in a belated or untimely way. Articulating the haunting musicality of the pop song with the theologically loaded figure of the desert, the temporality of Chan's lovesong is eloquently captured in Eduardo Cadava and Paola Cortes-Rocca's ventriloquization of Roland Barthes in their analysis of his *Camera Lucida*: "In the midst of this loss, I experience the madness of a single desire: to affect time with time, secretly, in the night, and with the hope that, like the click of the camera, I may yet live to archive the music of my love for you."<sup>53</sup>

If Chan's post-secular vision is marked throughout the video in a surrealist vocabulary of allegorical disfiguration, hallucinogenic delirium, and animistic uncanniness, *BAGHDAD* concludes with a reflection on the theoaesthetic problem of abstraction that informs the scene of desertion referred to above. In the final scene of the video, we see nothing but the dancing flames of what seem like holiday sparklers in an otherwise darkened environment, accompanied by the ambient noise of a chaotic but festive musical performance. Repeating the procedure of the delirious hyper-zoom that appears throughout the video, what little spatial orientation was provided by the light-sources against the nocturnal ground is ruined, with the entire screen becoming an ecstatically flickering illumination that recalls the perceptual experiments of structural film as much as the disfiguring abstraction at work earlier in the Sufi scene. As the screen implodes into this play of presence and absence, obscurity and revelation, vision and blindness, a voice-over (this time in Chinese) rehearses the astrophysical principle of "dark matter," stating that the universe is made up primarily of a "mysterious dark energy" whose infinite presence can only be inferred through its

<sup>50</sup> For a sense of pre-2003 left discourse on the Iraq war, see Anthony Arnove, ed. *Iraq Under Siege: The Deadly Impact of Sanctions and War* (Boston: South End Press, 2000), especially "Voices in the Wilderness," "Myths and Realities Regarding Iraq and Sanctions," pp. 67-76.

<sup>51</sup> See Chan's "footnote" to this scene at <http://www.nationalphilistine.com/baghdad/houston/index.html>.

<sup>52</sup> Cited in Taylor, *Disfiguring*, p. 269.

<sup>53</sup> Eduardo Cadava and Paola Cortes-Rocca, "Notes on Love and Photography" *October* 116 (Spring 2006), p. 4.



effects on the finite, visible bodies. Alluding to the “divine dark” of the Medieval mystic Meister Eckhart’s negative theology (a key figure for Ad Reinhardt’s own abstractionist project of “retrieving the spiritual in a secular culture”),<sup>54</sup> Chan de-secularizes this concept, and transforms it into an allegory concerning the limits of human perception and consciousness vis-à-vis a kind of divine alterity inscribed in the faces of the strangers that have appeared—and disappeared—throughout the video

#### 4. *Now promise now threat*

The relay between profane illumination, abstraction, and the problem of the post-secular is rendered even more complex and explicit in Chan’s *Now promise now threat*. So-called “red states” such as Nebraska were variously scorned and ridiculed by many liberals and leftists after the 2004 election as sites of unthinking patriotic identification and religious backwardness—a charge informed by the Marxist thesis of Thomas Frank in *What’s the Matter With Kansas?* and often cited in the aftermath of 2008 Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama’s remark regarding working-class rural whites that, “it’s not surprising then that they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain

<sup>54</sup> See Taylor’s discussion of Reinhardt and Eckhardt in *Disfiguring*, pp. 85-87.

their frustrations.”<sup>55</sup> Frank proposed that the resurgence of religion in American public life over the past twenty years is primarily a rightwing ideological strategy to distract the masses from their true economic interests.<sup>56</sup> Without naively celebrating religion in a populist fashion, Chan avoids any simplistic version of Frank’s argument, instead weaving together interviews with local residents, desolate urban landscapes, and found-footage materials to construct a heterodox psychogeographic portrait of post-election Omaha as a site of ambivalent political identities and everyday religiosity haunted by the violent politico-theological imaginaries of Al Qaeda and the Bush administration alike.

The video opens with a black field marked with a horizontal line of blue digital light—recalling the minimal composition of a Barnett Newman painting<sup>57</sup>—accompanied

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in [www.nytimes.com/2008/04/13/us/politics/13campaign.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/13/us/politics/13campaign.html). Also see right-wing columnist Bill Kristol’s strategic attempt to yoke Obama’s remark to the classic Marxist diagnosis of religion as the “opiate of the people” in “The Mask Slips,” *New York Times*, April 14, 2008.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas Frank, *What’s the Matter With Kansas?* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2004).

<sup>57</sup> In Newman’s most famous paintings such as *Vir Heroicus Sublimus* (1950) the artist’s signature “zip” is typically arranged vertically, in a residually anthropomorphic evocation of the human figure. However, there also exist canvases in which the “zip” is horizontally situated, as in *Dionysius* (1949).



*Now promise now threat*, 2005

by the atmospheric noise of a video camera left to record an empty room. The blue line shudders slightly and then begins to flicker in and out of visibility at different points on the screen as the background noise becomes more intense, supplemented by what sounds like a scratchy electronic-transmission of a countdown in an unintelligible tongue. The line then expands and dissolves into a blurry, glowing orb that in turn gives way to what at first seems like a formless play of pixelated coloration. Yet one region of the color-field strikes a note of strange familiarity, training our eyes to make out the rough gestalt of a human figure. The color in question is the unmistakable fluorescent orange of the jumpsuits worn by the detainees held by the Bush administration at its extra-legal prison camp in Guantanamo Bay. Against the other noises—including a low digital drone—an American voice can be intermittently discerned uttering the words “release of prisoners” and “end this occupation,” as if to prepare us for an activist anti-war diatribe. Other regions of the screen begin to flicker and illuminate in an indication of activity surrounding the orange-clad figure. Abruptly, the soundtrack of this still-indeterminate scene is interrupted by an a cappella rendition of the Christian hymnal “This is My Father’s World” echoing through a low-quality sound system in a baritone African-American voice: “This is my Father’s world/O let me ne’er forget/That though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet./This is my Father’s world: why should



*Now promise now threat, 2005*

my heart be sad? /The Lord is King; let the heavens ring! /God reigns; let the earth be glad!" With the conclusion of the verse, the orange figure collapses into a horizontal orientation as it becomes evident that it is being besieged by the others surrounding it; we hear a series of muffled but nonetheless blood-curdling cries and a voice singing in Arabic, our memories oscillating between the infamous images of Guantanamo prisoners and the Al Qaeda beheading of a civilian contractor in Iraq in the Summer of 2004, several months after the advent of the Abu Ghraib images.

Suppressed by mainstream news organizations but widely available on jihadi websites and other online archives, these images are not presented by Chan directly, but are rather disfigured into a traumatic abstraction resembling something like digitally animated paintings by Mark Rothko. Such an association between high-modernist painting and the catastrophic visual culture of the post-9/11 era might seem counter-intuitive given the canonical Greenbergian account of optical purification and moral transcendence that has typically been attached to the work of artists such as Rothko and Newman. Yet such artists, many of whom were Jewish, in fact associated their withdrawal of figurative representation with a religiously-inflected post-Holocaust ethical iconoclasm along the lines of Adorno's injunction concerning the barbarism of lyrical poetry in the aftermath of Auschwitz,

in which the philosopher admonished against the violence of "turning suffering into images."<sup>58</sup> The traumatic abstraction of the opening scene recurs periodically throughout the rest of the overall trajectory of *Now promise*, shadowing the apparently more legible documentary elements of the video.

Immediately following the opening scene, an African-American man appears on screen surrounded by American flags and signs reading "Jesus Saves" and delivering an impassioned sermon in the tinny echo of the amplified voice we recognize from the Christian hymnal a few minutes earlier in the video. Addressing us with the wild-eyed enthusiasm of an unheeded prophet, the man enjoins, "People want to talk about Iraq?...We've got an Iraq right here at home. It's a spiritual battle, we must join the spiritual battlefield!" Detoured from the entropic flow of late-night public-access television in Omaha, this figure of domestic *jihad* stages an ideologically ambiguous moment of "bringing the war home." Disembedded by Chan from its apparently fundamentalist intention, the late-night prophet's injunction

<sup>58</sup> "Commitment" in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (Telos: Continuum, 1982), pp. 312-313. Mark Godfrey pursues this line of thinking in his essay "Barnett Newman's *Stations* and the Memory of the Holocaust" *October* 108, Spring 2004, pp. 35-50. This essay has recently appeared as part of Godfrey's groundbreaking study *Abstraction and the Holocaust* (Yale University Press: 2007).

to acknowledge the internal theological and political antagonism marking the home-front in the midst of global conflict is echoed by another set of appropriated materials from the Omaha Community Spotlight channel: a locally produced Martial Arts instruction program in which a black man and a white man engage in a carefully performed demonstration of sparring techniques that oscillates between physical aggression, technical virtuosity, and homosocial desire. Alluding to the specificity of racialized violence in the U.S. history, Chan also reinscribes this otherwise banal footage as a kind of choreographic diagram of the ambivalence of the friend-enemy relation in general, each body simultaneously attracting and repulsing, negating and affirming the other. Yet this deliberate rehearsal of bodily conflict ultimately resolves itself with a kind of neat, sanitized conclusion; when one is overcome by the other, the sparring partners help one another back onto their feet in order to move onto a new exercise. This footage thus conjures a kind of utopian intersubjective diplomatic economy whose rules of engagement are established and respected in advance by the warring parties—a far cry from the flouting of international law by the Bush administration, but also from the reality of political conflict as theorized by figures including Walter Benjamin to Carl Schmitt to Chantal Mouffe, all of whom stress in different ways that political struggle involves an impassioned challenge to the very boundaries that

demarcate and legitimate the space of politics-as-usual in the first place rather than a sheerly rational negotiation.<sup>59</sup> Chan thus polemically juxtaposes the choreographed symmetrical conflict of the sparring-partners with the divine enthusiasm inspiring the prophet who insists on bringing the “spiritual battle” to the home front.

Following a long line of neo-avant-garde videographic appropriations of found footage,<sup>60</sup> for Chan the unsettling enthusiasm of the prophet and the sanitized choreography of the martial artists function as allegorical barometers of the theologico-political conundrum of post-9/11 America as crystallized in the contested ideological climate of war-time Nebraska.

Recalling Ralph Waldo Emerson’s insistent metaphors of the “climates of history,” and his injunction to “read the weather” during the Civil War,<sup>61</sup> *Now promise* is marked throughout by meteorological tropes of gusts, winds and storms. This is most pronounced in the recurrence throughout *Now promise* of altered television weather reports in which the generic addressee of the general televisual public has been affectively reinscribed as a missive to “Dearly Beloved” while digital storm clouds hover over the map of Omaha, re-annotated

<sup>59</sup> Drawing on Schmitt’s theorization of the friend-enemy relation, Mouffe remarks in an interview with Branden Joseph, Thomas Keenan, and Rosalyn Deutsche, “what makes people act politically is what I’ve called ‘the passions.’ Collective identifications have to do with desire, with fantasies, with everything that is not interests or the rational. Instead of thinking about politics as a place where we all get together and try and find the rational solution...politics needs to speak to people in order to mobilize them toward democratic designs.” See “Every Form of Art Has a Political Dimension,” *Grey Room* 02 (Winter 2001), p. 123.

<sup>60</sup> For an account of the para-situationist use of found-footage in U.S. avant-garde film ranging from Bruce Conner to Craig Baldwin that draws on Craig Owens’ Benjaminian account of the allegorical fragment (discussed above) see Catherine Russell, “Archival Apocalypse: Found Footage as Ethnography,” in *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*, pp. 238-273.

<sup>61</sup> See Eduardo Cadava, *Emerson and the Climates of History* (Stanford: 1997).

as covert telegraphic indications of anxiety, depression, fear, and outrage.

Such meteorological tropes are also evident in a series of meditative still-shots dispersed throughout the video in which everyday images, objects, and landscapes are disfigured into theological ciphers, set uncannily into motion by invisible atmospheric forces in a way that recalls the fluttering book-leaves of the Baghdad *bazaar*. These range from the light reflected from the shimmering leaves of a rural tree-grove, to the flapping detritus of an informal roadside trash heap, to a shivering, capsized road-sign indicating the little-known birthplace of Malcolm X in the empty agricultural outskirts of Omaha, to a huge sheet of industrial plastic affixed to the facade of a construction site that ripples and bellows in almost slow-motion fashion, recalling a kind of funeral veil.

Yet the most significant instance of this motif of the uncanny re-enchantment of the everyday landscape focuses on a modest agit-prop placard precariously attached to a rural road sign: evidently produced on a personal computer, it reads “YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN IF YOU WANT TO GO TO HEAVEN.” The placard flutters intensely in the wind of the desolate landscape for around twenty seconds before being flipped over to reveal its empty reverse-side as it is hung-up on the edge of the road sign to which it is attached. The placard appears to be on the verge of being lifted skyward and dispersed into the currents of the atmosphere like one of the errant email icons that are swept across the screens of ...my birds.

Along with Chan’s techniques of digital disfiguration and found-footage appropriation, such allegorical ambient details recur throughout the video and stand in dynamic tension with a series of documentary-style interviews with a variety of Omaha citizens: A young Catholic woman who opposes abortion and the Iraq war on the same biblical grounds; a lab technician from the University of Nebraska who criticizes the Democrats for their neglect of the rural poor; and an 18-year old military

recruit about to leave for Iraq in the hopes of receiving funding for college. As the latter young man voices his ambivalent commitment to the U.S. project in Iraq, the video reverts to the traumatically abstracted footage of the Al Qaeda beheading, conjuring the violence he is likely to face in his overseas assignment. Ultimately, this chromatic hallucination recedes into a monochromatic field of grey, with a minimal horizon of darker grey at the very bottom of the screen, indicating the automatic stare of a stationary camera focused on an empty wall, a backdrop waiting for Al Qaeda’s nightmarish theatricalization of violence.

Yet abstraction is also associated at various points in the video with the possible advent of alternative inscriptions of the mundane and the divine, the profane and the sacred, the rational and the religious that might challenge fundamentalist violence, whether on the part of Al Qaeda or right-wing Christians in the U.S.

This possibility is opened through an interview with a local Protestant pastor who speaks eloquently to Chan about the genealogy of the notion of evangelism, and its strategic appropriation by right-wing forces in the United States since the 1970s. The pastor criticizes the “politicization” of the Gospel by such forces in their call for a seamless integration of Church and State, arguing that Jesus was nothing if not an opponent of governmental power during the Roman Empire who addressed himself to the plight of the suffering and the poor underserved and marginalized by the powers-that-be. The pastor indicates the extent to which the religious domain is internally contested and far from a homogenous bloc of ideological backwardness. As the pastor speaks, we see quotidian scenes of the spaces and services of his church. A cut-out paper heart reading “love is the fruit of the spirit” is affixed to the church piano as it accompanies a choir; Church-goers partake of the transubstantial ritual of communion, sacrificially ingesting wine as the “blood of Christ.” Most remarkable, however, is a long-take shot of a stained-glass window that illuminates an otherwise darkened nave of the church, giving the space an ethereal



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ambient glow reminiscent of that of a digital screen.

Chan's shot is an art-historical *tour de force*, for the design of the window is not ornamented with traditional motifs, figures, or symbols; rather, it is designed according to a residually modernist grid scheme, evoking the "theoaesthetic" program of Mondrian cited by Taylor—"if one does not represent things, a place remains for the divine."<sup>62</sup> This shot takes on further art-historical consequences when we consider that, as Rosalind Krauss has argued, the Modernist grid was marked from the beginning by, "an indecision about its connection to matter on the one hand and spirit on the other."<sup>63</sup> For Krauss, this ambivalence was symptomatically related to the aftermath of, "the absolute rift that had opened between the sacred and the secular...In the increasingly de-sacralized space of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, art had become the refuge for religious emotion. It became, and remains, a secular form of belief." The grid as a formal device has always implied a hostility to representational illusionism and narrative or literary motifs; on the one hand, this repudiation of the figural was heralded as enabling the revelation of the basic logical structures of perception and cognition in general, related the grid's echoing of the

material structure of the canvas itself. Yet this secular, epistemological, or materialist approach to the grid was haunted by its sacred counterpart, in which the liquidation of illusion was assumed to provide access to the transcendental structure of the cosmos. Crucially, an important precursor to the modernist grid was the Romantic iteration of the window as both a figure of rational vision—a frame through which the exterior world could be gazed upon—and an allegory of spiritual inspiration—an uncontrollable penetration of light into the interior space of the subject.<sup>64</sup>

The art-historical stakes of Chan's shot are further compounded in light of the Gerhard Richter's recent production of a gridded stained-glass window for the Cologne Cathedral, which is worth discussing as a conclusion to our consideration of Chan's videos. In a critical review of the project, Benjamin Buchloh sounds an anxiety about Richter's re-articulation of his earlier color-chart paintings, based in a Duchampian approach to the chromatic scale as a readymade commercial grid, with the spiritual luminance of stained glass pertaining to the domain of "primitive ritual." The progress of art, Buchloh argues, involves a shift from, "the spaces and rites

where the subject had been immersed in religious cult and in chromatic delusions of transcendence produced by colored glass chips to the spaces of the subject's self-determination and manifest situatedness in the optical and cognitive parameters of the material opacity of Renaissance perspective painting."<sup>65</sup> Buchloh suggests, with great anxiety, that Richter may have "undone" this progressive movement by his "return to the folds of the cathedral and stained glass." "Thus one would have to contemplate," Buchloh writes, "whether Richter's window declares...a decisive end, if not manifest opposition, to the Enlightenment culture of modernist painting and its historical project of secularization."<sup>66</sup> Buchloh concludes by asking, "whether these manifest denials of the Enlightenment project of the artistic critique of color constitute an actual desire for a return to the folds of the spiritual, the religious, and the transcendental as immutable conditions of experience that have to be remobilized in the present with more urgency than at any other time during the past fifty years of art production."<sup>67</sup> Opposed to "the currently universal tendency toward *retardaire* religious revivals"—including those of an increasingly xenophobic European Christendom as exemplified by the Cardinal of Cologne's resistance to Richter's project

<sup>62</sup> Cited in Taylor, *Disfiguring*, p. 49.

<sup>63</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Grids" in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT 1985), p. 12.

<sup>64</sup> See Chan's own re-theorization of the figure of the window in "On Light as Midnight and Noon" in Gioni, ed. *Paul Chan*, pp. 114-120, as well as Baker, "Paul Chan: The Image from the Outside," p. 14-16.

<sup>65</sup> Benjamin Buchloh, "Cologne Cathedral," *Artforum* (December 2007), p. 306.

<sup>66</sup> Buchloh, "Cologne Cathedral," p. 308.

<sup>67</sup> Buchloh, *ibid.*



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on the basis that, “it could just as easily appear in a mosque or a synagogue”—Buchloh’s text illuminates the stakes of Chan’s post-secular vision vis-à-vis the traditional avant-garde treatment of religion *tout court* as a backwards ideological mystification. While Chan would no doubt agree with Buchloh about the necessity of resisting fundamentalist appeals to ethno-religious identity, he does not take this as justification for pathologizing religion as such. As I have stressed throughout this text, in both *BAGHDAD* and *Now promise* religion emerges less as an “immutable condition of experience” or a “primitive cult” than as a dynamic, contested, and uncertain force operative on various registers of social life and aesthetic signification alike. Indeed, the stained-glass window emerges for Chan as a kind of Bretonian magic-circumstantial encounter in which Modernist abstraction itself becomes a kind of *objet trouve* whose formal principles have migrated to the quotidian space of a church in Nebraska. There, the theoaesthetic dimension of abstraction is culturally reactivated in relation to the pastor’s progressive discourse of universality and social justice, but held out only as an allegorical fragment within Chan’s video. The space of the local church is at once everyday in the sense of a familiar site of regular religious observance, but also, precisely because of its specific cultural function, a space of exceptional, sacred experience. Inscribed by Chan into the psychogeographical structure of

*Now promise*, the gridded stained-glass window comes to embody the key axiom of Benjamin’s profane illumination: “to make the impenetrable everyday and the everyday impenetrable.”

## 5. Conclusion

Chan’s work is not religious in any traditional art-historical or iconological sense; if approached at the level of theme and content, religion in fact plays only an occasional role in the three videos considered in this essay. However, in their constant complication of rationalist models of vision through Surrealist techniques of derangement, intoxication, and blindness, their confrontation with what Caputo calls the “unhinging” of subjectivity by moments of inspiration, suffering and empathy, their manifest devotion to an ethics and politics of love animated by the everyday divinity of the face of the Other, and ultimately by an exploration of the limits of the human itself as enacted by tropes ranging from the monkey, the muezzin, and the monochrome, Chan’s pair of psychogeographic urban portraits work in the aftermath of both the avant-gardist and formalist iterations of modernism, as well as the skepticism of postmodernism understood as a critical endeavor aimed at demystifying the seductive and illusory realm of aesthetic experience in general (not to mention religion as a presumably hegemonic

right-wing ideological horizon).<sup>68</sup> Chan does not aim to restore a missing religiosity to a profane or debased artistic discourse, as James Elkins seems to suggest in his concern with an art capable of “conveying spiritual values” or Massimiliano Gioni when he discusses Chan’s work in terms of a “new language of symbols with which to articulate a new sense of shared faith.” Chan’s self-described “religious turn,” takes a major risk in both political and artistic terms. But it is arguably worth accompanying Chan in his pursuit of an artistic project that would put pressure on the uncritical and often chauvinistic iterations of secularism made by leftists and liberals who would still insist on positing human rationality as its own source of immanent illumination and guidance, disavowing what Claude Lefort once called “the experience of a difference that is not at the disposal of human beings and that cannot be abolished therein; the experience of a difference that relates human beings to their humanity, [which means] that their humanity cannot be self-contained, and that it cannot absorb its origin and ends in those limits. Every religion states in its own way

<sup>68</sup> See Baker, “Paul Chan: The Image from the Outside,” pp. 14-15. Baker draws on Hal Foster’s suggestion that contemporary art operates in a condition of “aftermath,” criticizing the rhetoric of “ends” in modernist and postmodernist discourse alike—which we might also apply to the narrative of “end of religion” taken for granted by both. See Foster, “The Funeral is for the Wrong Corpse,” in *Design and Crime* (Verso: 2002), pp.123-143.

that human society can only open itself to itself by being held in an opening it did not create."<sup>69</sup> Without holding forth a utopian promise of transcendence and reconciliation in the spiritual beyond, Chan takes the post-secular condition as an aesthetic, ethical, and political challenge that has become unavoidable at the dawn of the twenty-first Century.

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<sup>69</sup> Claude Lefort, "The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?" in De Vries and Sullivan, eds. *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, p. 157.



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