



Fig. 1. Ben Shahn. *The Lucky Dragon*. 1960. Tempera on board, 215 x 122 cm (84 1/2 x 48 in.). Fukushima Prefectural Museum of Art, Japan. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2020.

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A Unique Universalism: Ben Shahn and the Rhetoric of Visual Anecdotes

Abstract: Anecdotes have often been discussed as textual forms shaped by means of language and narrativity. Yet various traditions in visual culture have explored the representation of anecdotal scenes in paintings, drawings, or other media. While some scholars link the notion of visual anecdotes to specific traditions such as genre paintings, this article argues for an anecdotal style that emerged in the period of American modernism and featured unique combinations of image and text. Looking at the work of Ben Shahn, one of the most prolific American artists in the first half of the twentieth century, I contend that the interplay, in his art, of textual fragments with images of the human body established an intricate visual rhetoric. Produced in the 1950s against the historical backdrop of the Atomic Age, these hybrid forms aimed for historical specificity and served as a critique of acts of injustice, ultimately supporting Shahn's conviction that art could be used for the purposes of communication. Yet I argue that his work also explores, at both a textual and visual level, the challenge of art in general and anecdotes in particular to relate the peculiar to the universal without becoming merely more abstract or losing the connection with human experience.

Keywords: Ben Shahn, Cold War Culture, Political Art, Sacco and Vanzetti, Visual Anecdote.

1 Ben Shahn and American Visual Culture in the 1950s

In the mid-1950s, the painter and photographer Ben Shahn gave a series of lectures at Harvard University later published as *The Shape of Content* (1957) in which he reflected on the development of his art and career.¹ A contemporary of artists such as Stuart Davis, Raphael Soyer, William Gropper, and Walker Evans, Shahn had produced a substantial body of work in painting, large-scale murals, lithographs, and illustrations as well as photographs for the

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Farm Security Administration and posters for the Office of War Information (OWI). After working as a modernist in the 1920s and turning to social realism during the Great Depression, the war years had seen him moving away from the depiction of topical issues, instead attempting to express a universal experience of humankind. Yet, as an artist suspicious of modern science and statistical thinking, Shahn wanted to avoid abstract generalities and formulated a notion of universal experience that was grounded in uniqueness and peculiarity. While to him the sociology of the 1950s propagated averages devoid of individual qualities, Shahn suggested that “the universal is that unique thing which affirms the unique qualities of all things.” He went on to explain: “The universal experience is that private experience which illuminates the private and personal world in which each of us lives the major part of his life” (1957: 47). This seemingly paradoxical idea of a unique universalism, which regarded the specificity of experience – its singularity and peculiarities – as universally relatable, is an apt shorthand description for the special quality of Shahn’s work from the 1950s that I wish to focus on, in particular two series of images I will consider as visual anecdotes in this essay.

In the two series to be discussed here, Shahn references concrete historical incidents: on the one hand, the infamous 1920s trial of the two anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti; on the other, the Cold War reality of atomic tests, in particular the so-called “*Lucky Dragon* incident.” While the case of Sacco and Vanzetti culminated in their execution in 1927, the *Lucky Dragon* incident concerned the contamination of Japanese fishermen after the testing of an American atomic bomb in 1954 and the subsequent death of one of the crewmen, Aikichi Kuboyama. Both series include images of human beings, combining textual and visual elements and embedding them in a historically specific scene with a place, a time, and a powerful storyline. Semiotically, then, the visual objects to be considered as visual anecdotes in this essay create multiple meanings at both a pictorial and a language-based level as well as through their combination and juxtaposition. Shahn, who was trained as a lithographer, meticulously worked on the typeface of his written material, making it unique and highly individual. The lettering had “a place in and around pictures both as communication and as design,” as he stated in a 1949 reflection on “If I Had to Begin My Art Career Today” (1972: 97). But by laying out exemplary situations and experiences, he ultimately shifted the emphasis from an individual to a systemic level – from the trial of two Italian immigrants to the U.S. American justice system and from Japanese fishermen to the specter of atomic war.

In this sense, Shahn’s images are different from other types of visual anecdotes which, understood as a distinct category, need careful consideration. By incorporating textual inscriptions Shahn’s work explores the dialectic of

singularity and exemplariness, a crucial element of anecdotes according to Malina Stefanovska (2009), at different semiotic levels. Following art scholar John Fagg (2004) and his discussion of early American modernism, anecdotal paintings may depict self-contained scenes, or they may represent genre paintings featuring small, anecdotal details. Shahn's visual anecdotes share the quality of presenting brief, self-contained incidents and, furthermore, incorporate what Fagg calls "a reality claim as well as the potential to puncture and disrupt" (2004: 475). However, the inherent tension between text and image also makes them different. They combine representations of the human body with stories of its dissolution in ways that highlight vernacular language and individualized images but also aim for general insights and meanings. In other words, Shahn's anecdotes establish the dialectic of singularity and exemplariness through their peculiar combination of text and image.

Shahn developed this form of text-image combinations during the 1930s, in part working against then prevalent notions of (French) avant-gardism but also shaping his style from within a New York-based immigrant culture enmeshed as much in political activism as in popular and mass culture. While producing a series of watercolors dedicated to the Dreyfus Affair – dating back to 1890s France and dealing with injustice and antisemitism – Shahn discovered his predilection for expressive directness and communicability. He recalls that he began to see a new form of expression, "a means by which I could unfold a great deal of my most personal thinking and feeling without loss of simplicity. I felt that the very directness of statement of these pictures was a great virtue in itself" (1957: 36–37). According to Susan Chevlowe, this moment of linking politics and aesthetics in the Dreyfus series was typical for Shahn's generation of Jewish artists for whom left-wing politics had become a "secular religion" and who "were shaped by the immigrant experience, by labor struggles, and by the Great Depression" (1998: 25). After the historical rupture of the First World War with images serving as propagandistic elements of warfare, American visual culture increasingly faced the artistic challenge of using actual and individualized incidents – narrative fragments or anecdotes – to signify a generalizable and common experience. For Shahn and other socially conscious artists, this challenge revolved around the question of how the modern, increasingly devastating experience of destruction and injustice could be represented through pictorial forms that were at the same time highly symbolic *and* based on individual experience.

Viewed through the lens of American cultural history, the underlying question of how individual anecdotes may be related to more comprehensive narratives of injustice, has been a pressing issue for artists and authors since the early republic. One of the bestsellers of American short fiction, Washington Irving's

The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon from 1820, featured an essay on “Traits of Indian Character,” which criticizes American society for its lack of understanding of Native Americans and which includes an anecdote about the violation and plundering of the Sachem mother’s tomb by the planters of Plymouth. The function of this anecdote was to show how Native Americans had been mistreated and to explain why this mistreatment justified their frequent outbursts of violence and cruelty. In Irving’s essay, therefore, the anecdote serves metonymically to reference an experience that illustrates the larger narrative of injury, presenting an individual scene as a typical instance of atrocities perpetrated by white men and thereby using it to put forward a general and comprehensive argument – a pattern which would resurface in later decades. Authors such as Richard Wright or Ralph Ellison invoked the exemplary status of cruel anecdotes for a vision of racial and racist hierarchies inherited from slavery, while Bernard Malamud, writing about the Holocaust in the 1960s, spotlighted the random quality of murderous acts in “The German Refugee” (1964) and suggested in the concluding section that they were presented most forcefully through the matter-of-factness and understated quality of their plain description. In literary history, then, anecdotal evidence of cruel or atrocious acts survives most forcefully in the genre of the short story.

In Shahn’s case, numerous of his paintings and illustrations combine text and image in ways that create meanings at the textual level of micro-narratives as well as at the pictorial level of figurative representations. As a social realist and a member of the left-leaning intellectual milieu and Jewish community of New York City, Shahn aimed to link the topicality of journalism with the universality of symbolic or allegorical depictions (cf. Pohl 1998). Bringing together a journalistic and an art discourse, he focused on specific, individual groups of victims, but also on the more general and abstract conditions of victimization. Likewise, he depicted the random and contingent scene – the incident – but also included references to its enormous historical and moral significance. Thus combining textual material with corporeal gestures, Shahn’s images were readable, first, as historically specific scenes and, second, as reflections on their meaning and moral implications. In this way, the often shocking and unfathomable quality of acts of injustice throughout the twentieth century, which was present in all discourses ranging from journalism to art, was framed by a meditation on their representability with artistic means.

In Shahn’s development as an artist, the shift from topical issues of the Great Depression to a broader notion of universal experience took place during the years of the Second World War. One reason for this changing outlook was the enormity of war-related events, including acts of persecution and destruction taking place in Europe and Asia, another the need to address a broader audience

while working for government projects and institutions. A crucial case in point is the war poster “This is Nazi Brutality” (1943), which Shahn created at the Office of War Information after the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich in Prague and subsequent German revenge killings at Lidice (then Czechoslovakia) in 1942. It shows the hooded, shackled figure of a man to be executed and the official Nazi statement announcing the destruction of Lidice. In his design, Shahn uses the statement as both a detached *and* a personal narrative, signifying something that had happened to an individual subject – represented by the shackled figure – as well as to abstract categories of victims. However, by not showing the victim’s face, Shahn blocks the viewer’s access to common markers of suffering and interiority, thus withholding crucial aspects of individual experience (cf. Decker 2019).

In this case, then, Shahn’s poster design and the tensions between its textual and graphic elements suggest an ambiguous stance on the ability of art to bring together individual experience and its general, or even universal, significance in meaningful ways. The horrific experience of total warfare with its millions of dead or displaced persons cried out for less local and topical forms of expression, but these forms always seemed to come at a price. Shahn put the dilemma succinctly in one of his Harvard lectures: “How can one actually achieve a universality in painting without becoming merely more generalized and abstract?” (1957: 45). While his individual style had evolved from a desire for directness and simplicity, the transition that a global war seemed to be calling for posed new challenges. Looking back on this period, Shahn noted the wish to broaden his outlook. Earlier in his career he had believed that the incidental and the topical could evoke life as a whole; now his view had changed: “I wanted to reach farther, to tap some sort of universal experience, to create symbols that would have some such universal quality” (ibid.). However, since becoming more universal should not mean merely becoming more general, Shahn pursued the aspiration of a unique universalism, or, as art historian Cécile Whiting has suggested, a “pluralistic universalism” in his art of the 1950s (2016: 13) – a universalism that avoids the naive humanism critics noted in the 1950s about ambitious and seminal shows such as *The Family of Man* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1955.²

² See Winfried Fluck for an instructive reconsideration of *The Family of Man* exhibition. Following his analysis, traditional references to the common humanity of the show or, alternatively, to its lack of difference, no longer do justice to its legacy. He suggests a new “narrative of poetic self-recognition” to describe the complex aesthetic and social dimensions of the exhibition and concludes that it was “not simply a naïve liberal confirmation of a universal humanity narrative, but an inventory of imaginary possibilities of the self at a particular time” (2018: 129).

On the one hand, Shahn's search for this new symbolism produced a series of paintings titled "allegory," which includes condensed, emblematic images of intense feelings or states of mind, most importantly a lion-like head surrounded by a wreath of flames (cf. Shahn 1957: 129). This allegorical image evolved from a commercial assignment for an article on a tenement fire which had killed four children of a black man named John Hickman (cf. Shahn 1957: 25–52; Pohl 1989: 66–72). On the other hand, the wish to capture a universal experience without, however, abandoning the unique and peculiar quality of that experience also found expression in text-image combinations that belonged less to the transhistorical trajectory of allegories and more to the historically grounded character of visual anecdotes. Thus, during the course of the 1950s, Shahn shifted his attention to the threat of nuclear warfare and he returned to the infamous trial and conviction of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, which had been the topic of his breakthrough series of paintings in the early 1930s.

2 The Human Body in the Atomic Age

Shahn's series of paintings on the threat of nuclear weapons – eventually called the *Lucky Dragon* series – emerged from an assignment to create a number of drawings for an article about the *Lucky Dragon* incident in which a Japanese fishing vessel was accidentally exposed to atomic fallout near the Marshall Islands, causing the death of fisherman and radio operator Aikichi Kuboyama. Four years later, in 1958, *Harper's Magazine* commissioned Ralph Eugene Lapp, a physicist and scientific advisor on atomic energy during the Second World War, to write an essay on the 1954 testing of the H-Bomb and the fate of the *Lucky Dragon*. "The new Bikini bomb was of incredible destructiveness," Lapp conceded (1958: II, 54). Shahn provided numerous drawings for the essay and these drawings, in turn, became the basis for his independently produced *Lucky Dragon* series.

In one of these paintings Shahn combines a personal statement of the fisherman Kuboyama with an image of his sick and dying body at the Tokyo hospital. Kuboyama's body, which had been exposed to radioactive fallout, is placed at the center of the painting against an abstract background; he is seated on a thinly sketched and seemingly fragile hospital bed (fig. 1). Hardly wearing any clothes, Kuboyama's body is presented in a semi-transparent state that allows the viewer to see through his skin and gaze at the system of arteries and veins pumping blood through a body that had been poisoned as a result of the atomic tests. Indeed, although Kuboyama is sitting in an upright position,

parts of his body are so transparent that they seem to lack any substance and appear as if they will soon collapse. In his right hand, he presents a written note.

The design of Shahn's painting combines elements of two drawings he created for the *Harper's* article. One drawing from a section of the article on the hospitalization of the boat's crew showed a half-naked fisherman sitting on a bed and looking to the left (cf. Lapp 1958: II, 55). Significantly, this body looks younger, stronger, and shielded by an impenetrable outer skin. The second drawing that Shahn incorporated into his later painting – a black patch to the left of the fisherman's head – had originally been included in the article's description of the atomic explosion in a section called "Sunrise in the West" (cf. Lapp 1957: I, 30). This drawing evokes the mushroom cloud following an atomic blast, but it also includes the signature allegorical element of Shahn's work: the image of a lion's head surrounded by flames and representing, as Shahn put it in one of the Harvard lectures, "some inner figure of primitive terror" (1957: 31). This motif had been used in earlier paintings as an allegorical representation of fire and destruction, and it was now related to the *Lucky Dragon* incident. As art historian Frances Pohl points out, in earlier paintings "the fire-wreath symbolized injustice and the destructive power of fire." In the 1950s, however, the motif had "come to symbolize the destructive power and unjust use of another cataclysmic 'fire' – nuclear weapons" (1998: 121).

Yet this allegorical reference recedes into the background, visible only upon close view. What the painting (fig. 1) displays in more prominent form is the textual note in Kuboyama's hand, meticulously crafted in a unique typeface. It presents in condensed, anecdotal form the incident:

I am a fisherman Aikichi Kuboyama by name. On the first of March 1954 our fishing boat the Lucky Dragon wandered under an atomic cloud eighty miles from Bikini. I and my friends were burned. We did not know what happened to us. On September twenty third of that year I died of atomic burn.

Similar to the Lidice poster produced during the Second World War, Shahn focuses on the final moments in Kuboyama's life, putting his weakened body on display for the viewers as the corporeal gesture of the painting, while the textual inscription serves to reference the generalizable implications of his trip. In this case, however, the moral framing of the incident is less accusatory and specific, leaving out who was responsible for the "atomic cloud." Yet the text clearly addressed an American public, which would have understood the references, having learned, as *Life* magazine put it in 1954, that the fisherman's story "translated the awesomeness of the H-bomb into human terms all Americans can comprehend" (Martin 1954: 17). This understanding allows the visual

anecdote to oscillate between the mundane world of a fishing trip and the horrific implications of atomic burn, between the lack of knowledge of the common people and the secrecy of a military superpower.

Thus, even though Shahn includes one of his typical allegorical motifs symbolizing fire and destruction, the painting aims for historical specificity. Against the powerful, but abstract scientific and military forces of destruction, looming like wild and evil beasts in the background, Shahn uses the fisherman's story to juxtapose the contingent scene of his crew's boating trip with the enormous historical and moral significance of its outcome. As Lapp stated in the conclusion of his essay for *Harper's Magazine*: "The true striking power of the atom was revealed on the decks of the *Lucky Dragon*. When men a hundred miles from an explosion can be killed by its silent touch, the world suddenly becomes too small a place for men to clutch such weapons" (1958: III, 79). The exposure to the blast and subsequent symptoms of atomic fever mentioned in the text and visible on Kuboyama's body demonstrate not only the frailty of human beings and the carelessness of the military, but also the lethal consequences of atomic weapons polluting the environment on an unprecedented scale. The universalism of this linkage was underscored by the fact that, in some of Shahn's other paintings from the *Lucky Dragon* series, Kuboyama's skin appeared to be significantly darker, almost black. Following Whiting's interpretation, the various ways of showing Kuboyama's body represented Shahn's attempt to elicit "empathy from the viewer, extending compassion across national, ethnic, and racial divides" (2016: 5). Just as the incident showed that military and economic relations had global repercussions, Shahn's pictorial variations implied that spotlighting one group of individuals affected by the explosion needed to be broadened to include other non-white minority groups.

Although testing nuclear weapons was not the same as atomic war and, thus, not an atrocious crime in the sense of the massacre at Lidice in 1942, Shahn's attempt to link Kuboyama's experience with the enormity of nuclear warfare points to similar challenges for his work. By combining figurative representations and textual inscriptions, Shahn's visual anecdotes create a unique hybrid form. At the figurative level, his corporeal gestures present the individual in intense moments of crisis and highly symbolic moments of truth. In this way, the body images establish the visceral, climactic intensity of the individual's final moments. At the level of textual inscription, on the other hand, Shahn's work establishes historical specificity and context but also introduces abstract linguistic categories. By combining the two levels, the recognizable human body in Shahn's visual anecdotes disrupts and freezes the flow of the textual narrative, while the textual inscription, in turn, legitimizes its claim as an exemplary image.

This unique combination in Shahn's work indicates that he attempted to face head-on the dilemma of how to negotiate the representation of the human body with the knowledge of its dissolution and death. By contrasting human figure and textual inscription, Shahn's visual anecdote produces a rift between the visual imprint of the body and the textual evidence of its eventual dissolution. This rift between corporeal presence and knowledge of its disappearance, between lifelike imprint and retrospective narrative of loss suggests that, multilayered as they were, Shahn's visual anecdotes about large-scale threats ultimately highlight the modernist dilemma of attempting to signify the unsignifiable: to present individuals as human beings with dignity and value, while also having to make sense of, and give meaning to, the contingency of their death.

3 Revisiting Sacco and Vanzetti

In the 1950s, Shahn revisited the trial of the two anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti when, in order to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of their execution, he was commissioned to draw the cover for the August 23rd, 1952 issue of *The Nation*. The trial, conviction, and execution of the two Italian-American men – a complex history sketched by Nunzio Pernicone (2001) – had been the subject of a series of paintings in the early 1930s. This series had helped Shahn to establish his style of personal involvement and directness, and to develop his topical interests. Now, following his gradual shift toward a unique universalism, he reinterpreted the iconography and meaning of their visual depiction. Among his earlier 1930s series, Shahn had produced the painting *Bartolomeo Vanzetti and Nicola Sacco* (1931–1932, Museum of Modern Art), which was based on a press photograph showing the two men handcuffed and sitting next to each other facing the reporters. The photograph from 1923 served as an inspiration for the overall scene, but Shahn carefully painted the men's facial expressions and clothes, brought out intense colors in the room, and shifted the viewers gaze to the handcuffs, shining and clearly visible against the black background. Even if their "somber expressions" were reinforced by the setting, as art scholar Laura Katzman contends (2001: 57–58), the men were clearly represented as dignified individuals facing the public with an element of calm resolve as well as subdued anger, their features highlighted by sharply drawn facial lines, but not exaggerated to the point of caricature.

The drawing from 1952 uses the same scene but reduces its graphic structure to the essential contours and outlines of the two men; it adds, in handwritten form, the famous personal statement by Bartolomeo Vanzetti made to a

journalist before his execution (fig. 2; cf. Pernicone 2001: 37). The result of this process – of this different form of repurposing the press photograph – was an image with less topical detail and individual humanity, but with an intensified and timeless, universal appeal. The two men are no longer flesh-and-blood victims of injustice put on display for a sensation-hungry public; instead, the drawing from 1952 presents them as flat, two-dimensional, yet condensed symbols of injustice with massive, hollow-eyed heads resembling death-masks more than living human beings. As Alejandro Anreus suggests, the image gives up “the rumpled individuality of the earlier likenesses for a more formal visual language, presenting Sacco and Vanzetti as members of the pantheon of victims of American injustice” (2001: 120). At the height of the Cold War, this could be seen as a statement against McCarthyism, the revisiting of an earlier historical moment to bring into sharp relief “a time of even greater division,” as Louis Joughin suggested about the 1950s in “25 Years Since Sacco and Vanzetti,” his article for the same issue of *The Nation* that Shahn provided the cover for (1952: 152).

Below the drawing of the two men Shahn includes, in his own handwriting, Vanzetti’s statement which, in the later serigraph *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti* from 1958 (New Jersey State Museum), was transformed into finely crafted capital letters similar to the *Lucky Dragon* painting. Both versions retained the stylized vernacular of Vanzetti’s Italian-American speech patterns, giving voice to his simple, but effective assessment of their situation:

If it had not been for these thing, I might have live out my life talking at street corners to scorning men. I might have die, unmarked, unknown a failure. Now we are not a failure. This is our career and our triumph. Never in our full life could we hope to do such work for tolerance, for joostice, for man’s onderstanding of man as now we do by accident. Our words – our lives – our pains nothing! The taking of our lives – lives of a good shoemaker and a poor fish peddler – all! That last moment belongs to us – that agony is our triumph. [sic] (fig. 2)

In Shahn’s design, Vanzetti’s statement serves as a final plea to the public, at the same time expressing, just as in the representation of Kuboyama, incredulity at the men’s involuntary fame and acceptance, even pride, regarding their significance for the causes of tolerance and justice, and provoking the heroic stance that “agony is triumph.” Shahn shifts the setting from the courtroom to an empty space which, judging from Vanzetti’s final words, is to be seen as the last step on their way to the electric chair. Again, the typeface of the statement emphasizes individually drawn letters and vernacular idiosyncrasies, but the two men and their curiously shrunken bodies seem to be speaking from their graves. As in the photograph, they look toward the viewers, but like ancient



Fig. 2. Ben Shahn. *Sacco and Vanzetti: Caption*. 1952. Black ink on cream wove paper, 5.2 x 21.5 cm (2 1/16 x 8 7/16 in.). Photo: N/A. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Meta and Paul J. Sachs. 1956.184.B. Artwork © Estate of Ben Shahn / © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2020.

statues or, as Anreus writes, “ancient Greek theatrical masks” (2001: 120), the sockets of their eyes are empty, their bodies transparent.

Similar to the *Lucky Dragon* example, the combination of body image and textual inscription contrasts the anecdotal, informal tone of the brief narrative fragment with the disruptive force of a dying body put on display. Both visual anecdotes bring together the textual reference to a fateful historical incident – a secret test of atomic weapons and a politically motivated sentence of death – with an image of simple, ordinary people affected by it. Furthermore, both emphasize the act of making the anecdote’s meaning public by showing the men facing the viewers and pointing their fingers, as in Kuboyama’s case, directly to the message. Yet in the case of Sacco and Vanzetti, the text is longer, less descriptive than celebratory and, overall, clearly partisan. It shifts the meaning of the historical events from the trial to the execution, from the accidental circumstances of the men’s lives to the universal significance of their death, ultimately helping the cause of tolerance and justice.

If, viewed from today, the vernacular style of Vanzetti’s statement sounds overly stylized, it still serves as a good example of the unique universalism Shahn was aiming for. Just as he manages, in his drawing, to capture the individual features of the two men, while also showing them as timeless masks, Vanzetti’s statement and his references to “man’s onderstanding of man” [sic] indicate that language – and typography – establish individuality but, crucially, that their uniqueness is also relatable and translatable to others. Shahn’s visual anecdotes, therefore, combine image and text in multi-layered ways. Yet in the end they postulate that individual peculiarities and their connection with universal qualities can be communicated by means of art. In this sense, revisiting the case of Sacco and Vanzetti in the early 1950s became an act of political resistance. While Joughin’s text in the issue of *The Nation* from August 1952 focused on the changes in the legal system, hoping that they had improved the search for justice, Shahn’s depiction on the cover memorializes Sacco and Vanzetti as martyrs in an ongoing struggle.

4 Art and Communication

Art historian Alejandro Anreus suggests that Shahn’s message was not just aimed at the anticommunist crusades of the early 1950s, but equally at the “apoliticized formalism of the New York School” (2001: 120) dominating the art scene after the war. Although, as Stephen Polcari has shown, there was some overlap between Shahn’s postwar work and the soon triumphant schools of abstract expressionism, Shahn made clear that he saw himself as an artist

dedicated to the communicative function of art, not to what he called its expressive function dealing with subjectivity and the self (1972: 93). For the visual anecdotes discussed in this essay and their idea of a unique universalism, the communicative function was based on two premises. On the one hand, as Shahn explained in his Harvard lectures, he believed that “individual peculiarities” were the most interesting aspects about people. Since art audiences were made up of individuals, they could be addressed in ways that affirmed their uniqueness (Shahn 1957: 38–39). Universalism in Shahn’s theory of reception, then, did not imply the notion of a homogenized audience; it posited that the individual peculiarities inscribed into art works were universally relatable by an audience equally made up of individuals.

On the other hand, the communicative function of Shahn’s work was built on the belief in the “unifying power of art,” to which he subscribed (Shahn 1957: 39). Again, as with his theory of reception, Shahn tried to establish a notion of the universal that was not based on generalities and abstract categories but included a sense of uniqueness. Although he claimed that the public was shaped and even unified by art works, his sense of unification retained, at its core, the idea of individual peculiarities and differences. As Shahn put it in his lecture: “One might say that a public may be so unified because the highly personal experience is held in common by the many individual members of the public” (*ibid.*). Both aspects of Shahn’s aesthetic theory – an audience made up of, and responding as, individuals, on the one hand, and the power of art to unify, but also to retain the sense of the peculiar and the personal, on the other – informed his search for a unique universalism in the 1950s and shaped the combinations of text and image discussed as visual anecdotes in this essay.

At a basic level, Shahn’s anecdotes express straightforward messages by putting individuals on display who had experienced accidental and contingent, but also symptomatic stories of injustice and death. Yet at the more intricate levels of their design, Shahn’s visual anecdotes produce a rift between the historical temporality of their narrative fragments and the timeless quality of their figures’ bodies, between the flow of the storylines and the hollow stasis of the figures’ faces. With their unique combination of text and image they attest to the artistic challenge of trying to give form to the relation, or, rather, the relatability of the peculiar and the universal. If, from today’s perspective, Shahn’s political messages appear to be delimited by McCarthyism and the Cold War politics of the 1950s, his experimentation with image, text, and typography represents an important step in the development of visual anecdotes. Shahn’s work not only confronted the paradox of giving meaning to the contingency of death, he also firmly placed his belief in the individual as irreducible object *and* subject of art, while also trying to transcend individualism for an inclusive social vision.

Shahn's idea of a unique universalism, then, may be seen as an attempt of dealing, politically and artistically, with the modern era of mass destruction by aiming for historically significant and individually grounded forms of visibility and by reinforcing, not in a naive way but rather in complex and critical terms, the hope of art as a communicative force in society.

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