In American visual culture, the 1930s and 1940s were a key transitional period shaped by the era of modernism and the global confrontation of World War II. Christof Decker demonstrates that the war and its iconography of destruction challenged visual artists to find new ways of representing its consequences. Dealing with trauma and war crimes led to the emergence of complex aesthetic forms and media crossovers. Decker shows that the 1940s were a pivotal period for the creation of horrific yet also innovative representations that boosted American visual modernism and set the stage for debates about the ethics of visual culture in the post-9/11 era.

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This book has evolved from a research project which I began five years ago under the working title “Hybrid Reflexivity: Visual Culture and the Representability of Violence in the Art of Ben Shahn.” It investigated the era of visual modernism in the United States and understood Shahn’s work—including his paintings, documentary photography, and graphic art—to be exemplary for the development of aesthetic forms dealing with violent social and historical events which were challenging to represent artistically. In more general terms, the project aimed to examine aesthetic explorations of traumatic experiences in U.S.-American visual culture during a pivotal historical period. How did artists acquainted with avant-garde modernist techniques and implicated in the social battles of American politics engage with the enormity of the global confrontations in the 1930s and 1940s? Put differently and taking up earlier work by E. Ann Kaplan and Susan Sontag, how could they incorporate the reality of war into complex aesthetic objects and at the same time create effective forms of communication?

One of my assumptions was that the media formations in the United States provided a crucial environment for the investigation of these questions. Visual culture during the modernist era was characterized by artistic strategies that expressed a high level of hybridity, combining and bringing together different types of materials, technologies, stylistic conventions, and rhetorical forms. With inspiration coming from international as well as vernacular traditions of painting, graphic art, photography, photo journalism, and moving images, and with the growth of powerful news and media corporations, many works dis-
played a high degree of intermediality or multimodality. Despite the marginal position of early modernist art in the United States, it was this distinct combination of modernity and modernization that fueled the visual artists’ interest in hybrid aesthetic processes and forms as well as the constant crossovers between them.

New York City was at the center of this social and cultural constellation. According to Alan Trachtenberg, New York represented the vision and reality of cultural pluralism and its art scene included a large number of assimilated immigrants—many with Jewish backgrounds—who had a special sensibility regarding their place in the “new world.” Seeing themselves as Americans, they nevertheless were “in search of a culture to which they might belong” (9). Commenting on photographer Paul Strand’s work as well as that of other groups and movements in New York, Trachtenberg suggests that they tried to deal with the dilemma resulting from modernism’s “historical situation in an age of contrary revolutions: can art be true to itself, to its aesthetic character, and at the same time serve social justice?” (6). This dilemma became increasingly urgent during the Depression years with the establishment of government sponsored programs and the further politicization of the art scene. Processes of modernization as well as the dedication to social justice and cultural recognition thus equipped artists and other creative individuals contributing to American visual culture with a distinct place to deal with the scenes of war.

In this vein, Ben Shahn’s work often highlighted the idea that traumatic experiences could only be evoked or alluded to indirectly, and preferably by combining different modes of expression. Moreover, having to engage with and make use of the depiction of atrocities posed a representational as well as ethical dilemma that Shahn’s work—situated between the tenets of modernism, the demands of social activism, and the rhetoric of propaganda—often answered through reflexive aesthetic strategies. Revisiting the decades of the 1930s and 1940s thus highlights a historical period which may rightfully be seen as the defining frame of reference in the 20th century for exploring the representability of violence.
While most chapters in this book reconsider these transformational decades, some of the guiding questions have emerged with renewed urgency from more recent events of the post-9/11 era. They not only emphasize that the challenges of imaging the scenes of war have intensified in the digital age but also make clear that key questions about the ethics of visual culture and representation are informed by developments that began in the 1940s. One of the most heated debates in the early 2000s took place in the wake of the Abu Ghraib photographs showing Iraqi prisoners being mistreated and tortured by American military personnel. The rapid global dissemination of these photographs led to a public outcry over an already unpopular war. However, it took some time before more fundamental issues were addressed, such as the basic question of representability. Could the suffering of others and the structural violence of power relations be represented by artistic means? What was the dialectic between what was being shown explicitly and what was left out and thus invisible? A second topic shifted the focus from the viewable to how it affected the viewers. Following Susan Sontag’s seminal work *Regarding the Pain of Others* in this regard, Judith Butler introduced the question of grievability in *Frames of War* as a key concern for violent images of war. Were they able to make us receptive to the suffering of others, did they allow viewers to respond to suffering at a distance? Butler highlighted the importance of framing, a concept and metaphor from visual art which alludes to the ways (and implicit norms) of presenting victimized human beings to the viewer in order to create empathy and to make them recognizable as grievable subjects. Highly critical of the practice of embedded journalism during the Iraq war, which integrated journalists into military units and thus delimited their independence, Butler argued that the human/not human divide was a major outcome of this compromised viewpoint. Yet the creation of a distinct visual perspective via photography is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, in U.S.-American culture it has existed ever since early photographs and popular photo-books were created in the wake of the Civil War. Still, Butler highlighted the importance of visual representations of war, emphasizing their ethical implications as visual evidence and aesthetic objects in need of interpretation. Following from
the Abu Ghraib prison photographs, she condensed the social and cultural constellations embedded in the images in her concept of the *scene*, which I am using for the title of this book. As Butler explains, a scene is “not just the spatial location and social scenario in the prison itself, but the entire social sphere in which the photograph is shown, seen, censored, publicized, discussed, and debated” (80). Thus, the process of imaging the scenes of war refers back to the crucial transitional period of visual modernism in the 1940s, however, its underlying ethical, aesthetic, and technological challenges are as relevant today as they were when the iconographies of war crimes and atrocities entered the public sphere.

As such projects go, my initial research agenda five years ago began to take on a life of its own and I realized that my interest in aesthetic crossovers and mixed media could be taken into different directions, theoretically as well as historically. I have therefore decided to present my findings as individual essays covering distinct topics to create a web of associational references, while leaving out two related pieces which have prominently appeared elsewhere. The first of these essays, “Fighting for a Free World: Ben Shahn and the Art of the War Poster,” examines Ben Shahn’s poster art as an attempt to deal with the narratives of atrocities coming out of Europe in the early years of World War II. It argues that war posters were a primary means of producing a direct form of visual communication while also, in Shahn’s case, including elements of complexity and reflexivity. The second essay, “A Unique Universalism: Ben Shahn and the Rhetoric of Visual Anecdotes,” develops the idea that Shahn’s combinations of text and image, which he began to produce during the Cold War may be seen as visual anecdotes aiming for universal appeal while also retaining unique individual peculiarities. In both cases, therefore, formal hybridity serves as a way of highlighting in complex artistic terms the struggle of individuals to survive under adverse circumstances and to retain a sense of human dignity in the face of the larger forces of warfare and injustice.

In the following chapters, I focus on six additional types of aesthetic and media crossovers. Chapter 1 explores my initial question of how the hybrid or mixed quality of aesthetic objects can be seen as a way of ad-
dressing and, in some cases, foregrounding the unrepresentability of war-related traumatic experiences. Chapter 2 discusses the representation and conceptualization of the enemy in the works of Ben Shahn and Leo Rosten during World War II as an attempt to engage with the experience of trauma and destruction at a distance. The third chapter shifts the focus to Shahn’s work as a photographer as well as painter and argues that in the larger cultural search for common visions of the post-war period, he ultimately favored subjective, yet photography-inspired work as a painter. Chapter 4 examines American cinema as a special site for aesthetic crossovers. I focus on the prevalence of transnational stories in the 1930s and 1940s which combined the narrative pleasure of romance with the ideological requirements of the war and complicated this well-established relationship by including references to national characteristics. I argue that the idea of crossovers in these examples appears most pronounced if we look closely at musical and performative codes as well as visual style. Chapter 5 explores how poetry and film have interacted artistically in U.S.-American visual culture. This chapter, while only loosely connected to my initial research agenda, supports the overall argument that the 1940s represented a watershed moment in visual modernism in terms of the representation of destruction and loss with considerably greater complexity and depth. I offer a glimpse at this process in the famous example of Citizen Kane from 1941, which demonstrates that the coming of age of American media culture in the 1930s intensified and diversified during the war years and beyond. Finally, the last chapter returns to the topic of trauma narratives and retraces how major changes in West German forms of remembrance of the Nazi era were triggered less by feature films in the immediate postwar era than by the American television mini-series Holocaust in the 1970s, which was so influential precisely because its perceived Americanness and melodramatic bluntness brought out anger, guilt, and other affects that had been repressed in previous decades. Again, a provocative form of multimodality—in this case of terrible historical events treated with dignity and a seemingly trivial media form—was employed to confront a traumatic sense of historical experience. And just as the 1940s attempts at combining popular entertainment with serious reflection had shown,
it contributed to the ambiguous notion that imaging the scenes of war may produce a sense of insight and knowledge while also obscuring the stylistic and aesthetic means of its construction. This ongoing artistic challenge of creating visualizations of horrific events shaped by aesthetic conventions as well as innovations while, in the process, also producing blind spots of the invisible and the unrepresentable will be a guiding idea for the essays assembled in this book.

Works Cited


