

HORROR/HUMOR/HOLOCAUST ROUNDTABLE

When the Laughter Sticks in the Throat:

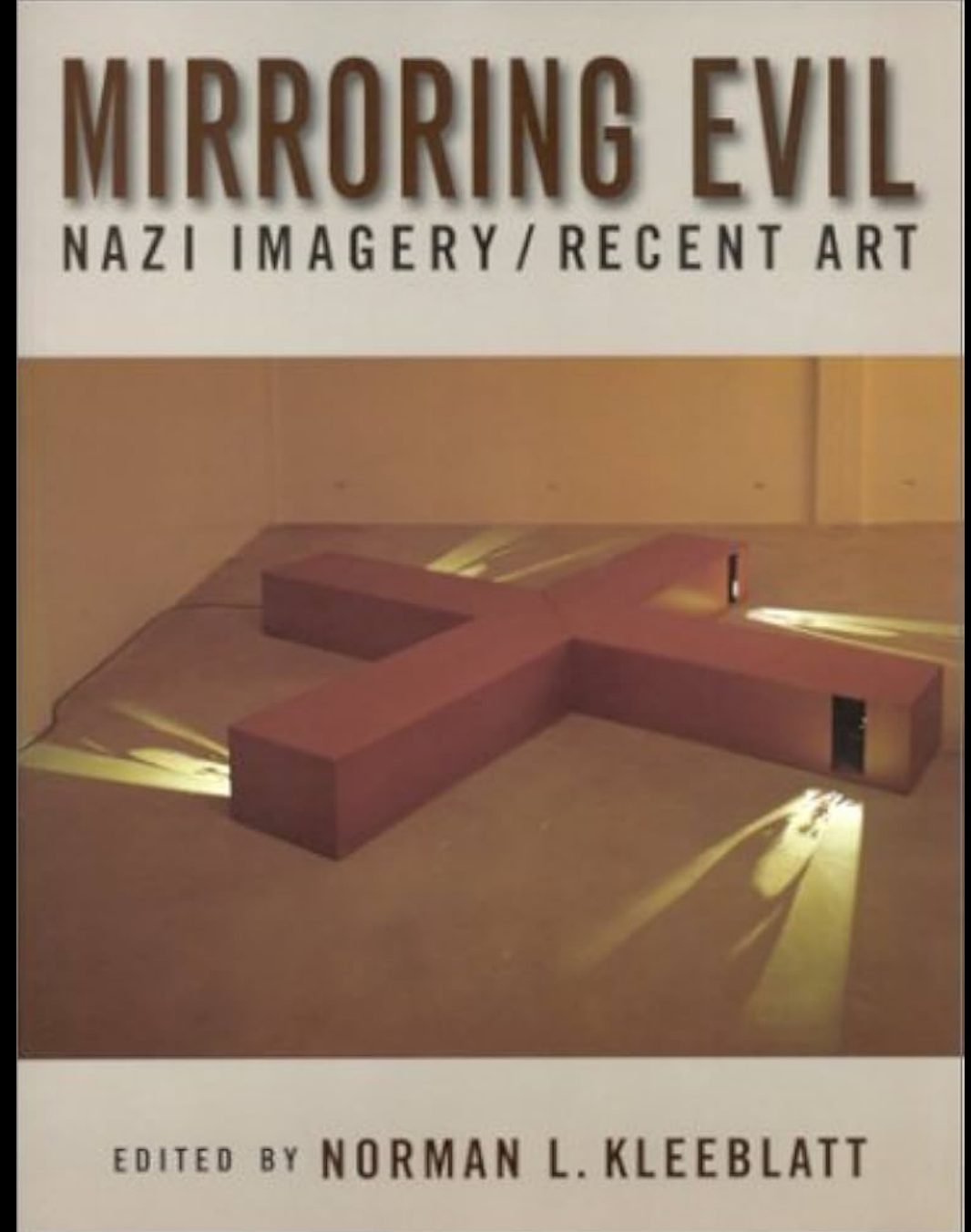
Four Artistic Takes on Horror, Humour, and the Holocaust

Boris Lurie
Sarah Schumann
Erez Israeli
Shahak Shapira



Professor Louis Kaplan, University of Toronto
University of Hamburg
24 March 2026

Almost a quarter century has passed since Norman Kleeblatt curated the controversial *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art* exhibition at the Jewish Museum New York in 2002. Against the numerous attacks that argued that these artistic works -- a number of which utilized bitter irony, satire, and black humor to represent the Holocaust -- served only as a “desecration to the memory of the dead,” trivialized its singular gravity, and “screamed ‘anti-Semitism!’”, Kleeblatt defended his curatorial choices arguing that he was giving voice to a new generation who no longer felt that they did had to promote redemption in art derived from Nazi horror and who were particularly interested in darkly humorous, queerly camp, and ironic post-modernist takes on its perpetrators.





Tom Sachs (US), Giftgas Giftset (1998)

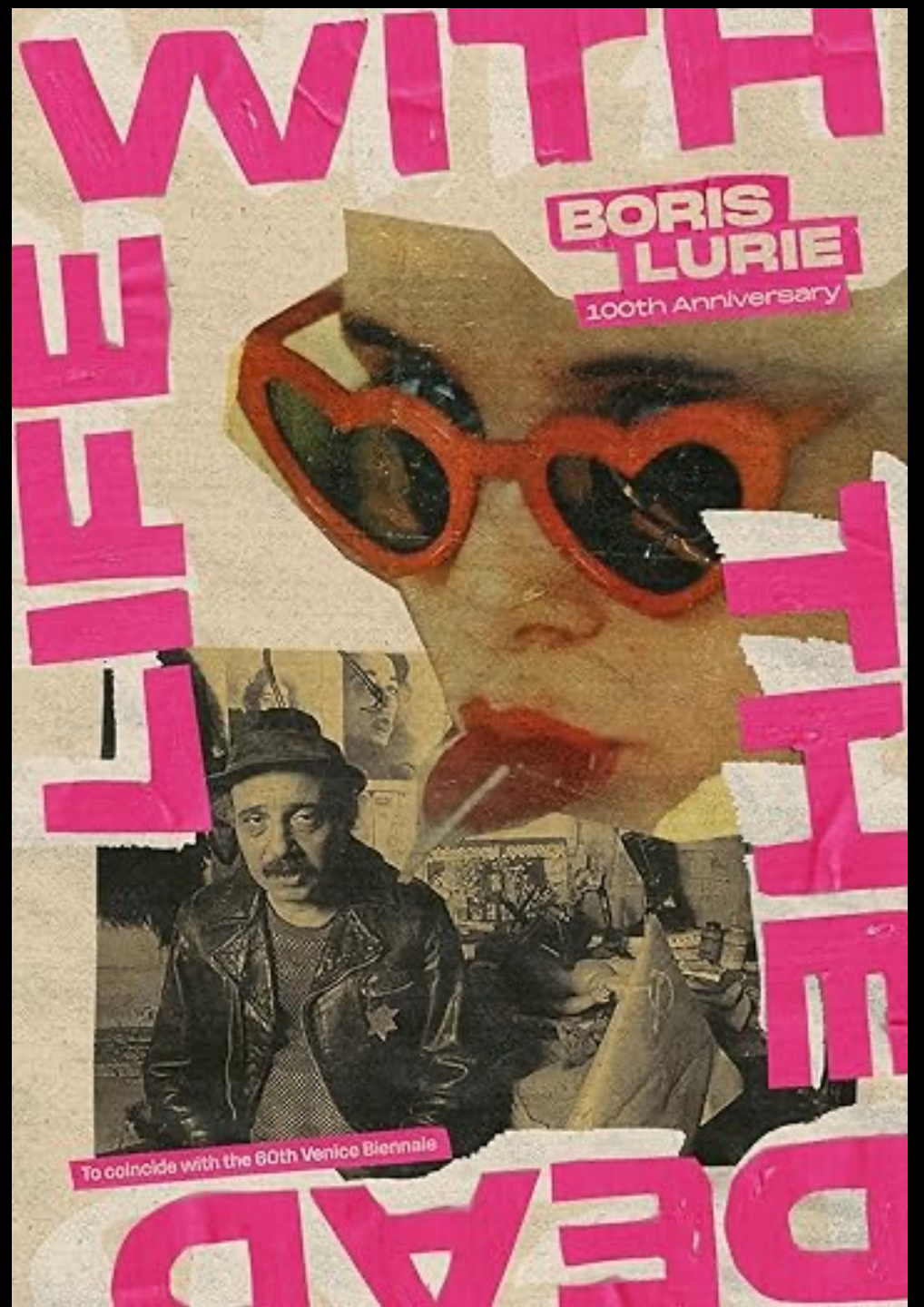


Zbigniew Libera (Poland), *Lego Concentration Camp* (1996)

The Sixtieth Venice Biennale held in 2024 featured a special exhibition dedicated to the transgressive and provocative art of Holocaust survivor Boris Lurie (1924-2008) on the 100th anniversary of his birth. It is an intense irony of history to observe Lurie's work showcased at this prestigious international contemporary art exhibition.



Opening Reception, Center for Persecuted Arts, Venice Biennale, 17 April 2024



Exhibition at the Jewish Museum Berlin 2016
Venice Biennale Exhibition "Life with the Dead" 2024

Kleeblatt discusses key aspects of the work of this Buchenwald survivor in his introductory essay, "The Nazi Occupation of the White Cube." He analyzes *Railroad Collage* (1963) and *Saturation Paintings (Buchenwald)* (1959-1964) as "transgressive art about the Holocaust era that places the viewer at the highly uncomfortable intersection between desire and terror." Kleeblatt acknowledges Lurie's "simultaneously crossing of forbidden boundaries – ones that have to do with sexuality, voyeurism and the Holocaust." But while the Holocaust and horror are crucial to this account, there is no mention of the transgressive humor that plays a key role in Lurie's incongruous provocations.



Boris Lurie in his New York studio with Judenstern affixed to his black leather jacket.



Boris Lurie, Saturation Painting (Buchenwald) 1959-1964. Collage: Photos and Newspaper on Canvas

Flatcar, Assemblage, 1945, by
Adolf Hitler

Boris Lurie, 1961

This brings us to an earlier “assisted readymade” (in the Duchampian sense) by Lurie from 1961 that is not mentioned by Kleeblatt. It is a work that contains a bitter dose of black humour.



Flatcar, Assemblage, 1945 by Adolf Hitler



Boris Lurie,
Railroad Collage
(Railroad to
America), c. 1963
Paper collage,
pencil and varnish
on photo
emulsion on linen
18 x 27 In.



Sarah Schumann with Harun Farocki, 1968. Harun Farocki directed the film portrait *A Picture of Sarah Schumann* a decade later.

Sarah Schuman,
Marilyn and Goebbels (1963)



Sarah Schumann,
Shock Collage, Untitled, 1959.

The sheep in wolf's clothing?

Sarah Schumann



Shock Collages
1957 - 1964

Spector Books





“This is a photograph of me as I wish I looked all the time. Then I might still have a chance of getting to Hollywood. But at present, I’m afraid, I usually look quite different.”

Anne Frank,
Diary entry.
10 Oct. 1942



Source Photograph Portrait of Anne Frank
May 1939

Shock Collage, Untitled, 1959.



THE NAZIS
WERE KNOWN
FOR MEDICAL
EXPERIMENTS
ON CONCENTRATION
CAMP PRISONERS.
THE MOST HILARIOUS
BEING ANNE
FRANKENSTEIN



TWO VERSIONS OF ISRAELI'S ILLUSTRATION TO THIS WORTSPIEL WITZ IN *JOKES*. (2015-2019) TRANSFORMING THE MOST FAMOUS HOLOCAUST VICTIM ANNE FRANK INTO THE BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN OR THE MONSTER ITSELF. THE JOKE INVOKES THE CLASSIC HORROR FILM NARRATIVE AND THE HORRORS OF NAZI SCIENCE (PERFORMED ON JEWISH VICTIMS). BITTER SARCASM IN "MOST HILARIOUS"

AN EARLIER QUEER AND CAMP STAGING THAT WAS IN SYNCH WITH ISRAELI'S JOKE.

The idiom of Ilya Sapiro's drag comedy *The Diary of Anne Frankenstein* performed in an OffOffBroadway theater in 2009, is camp, marked not only by its use of drag but also by its knowing delight in the ironies of misalliances and inversions.

Eddie Portnoy, "Anne Frank on Crank: Comic Anxieties" In BKG and Jeff Shandler, "Anne Frank unbound: Media, Imagination, Memory,"

A THEATRE A L'ORANGE PRODUCTION
THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANKENSTEIN
A NEW PLAY BY ILYA SAPIROE

OCT 1 - NOV 8
13TH STREET REP
THEATRE
50 W. 13TH STREET, NYC
WWW.THEDIARYOFANNEFRANKENSTEIN.COM

SHOWTIMES
THURSDAY 9:00
SATURDAY 9:00
SUNDAY 7:00

TICKETS
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overexposure.

The Diary of Anne Frankenstein relies on the humor of mismatch and inversion to challenge Anne Frank as an emblem of goodness. This provocative, if oblique, juxtaposition of make-believe horror with the actual horrors of the Holocaust is already signaled in the title's pun, which conflates Mary Shelley's monster with Anne's life and work. Sapiro's play burlesques vintage Hollywood horror films, using the disruptive force of drag. It is similar in approach to the 1975 cult film *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, but adds to the mix not only World War II espionage melodrama but also Anne Frank's story. In this mash-up of subjects, genres, and sensibilities, Anne herself becomes a hybrid with yet another reason to hide: as a hermaphrodite, the result of a Nazi doctor's botched medical experiment (reminiscent of the 1998 musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*), she is forced into an attic, where her only steady companion is her diary.

“Das Lachen bleibt im Hals stecken. Aber Humor hilft dabei, die Katastrophe der Vergangenheit zu bewaeltigen, glaubt der israelische Kuenstler Erez Israeli.” (“The laughter sticks in the throat, but humor helps to master the catastrophe of the past.”)

Carolin Wuerfel, “Lachen ueber Nazis,” *Die Zeit* (2015)



ISRAELI'S SERIES CONTAINS DOZENS OF HOLOCAUST JOKES EACH WITH AN ACCOMPANYING ILLUSTRATION WITH MANY OF THEM OVERTLY (HOMO)SEXUAL IN NATURE. THERE ARE ALSO IMAGE VARIANTS.

Erez Israeli (b. 1974) at his Jokes (2015-2019) installation in the Brno group exhibition, *Drop Dead Funny*, 2019.

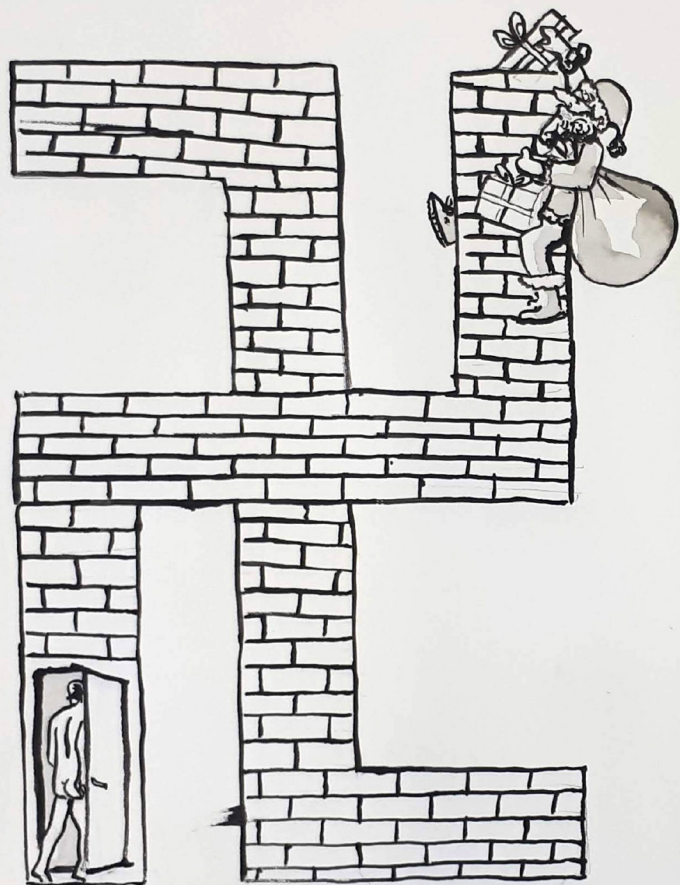
The second part of the joke was actually told by the Jewish prisoners in the KZ as gallows humour according to Chaya Ostrower's thesis (2000)

"Nothing connected with the Holocaust was funny!"

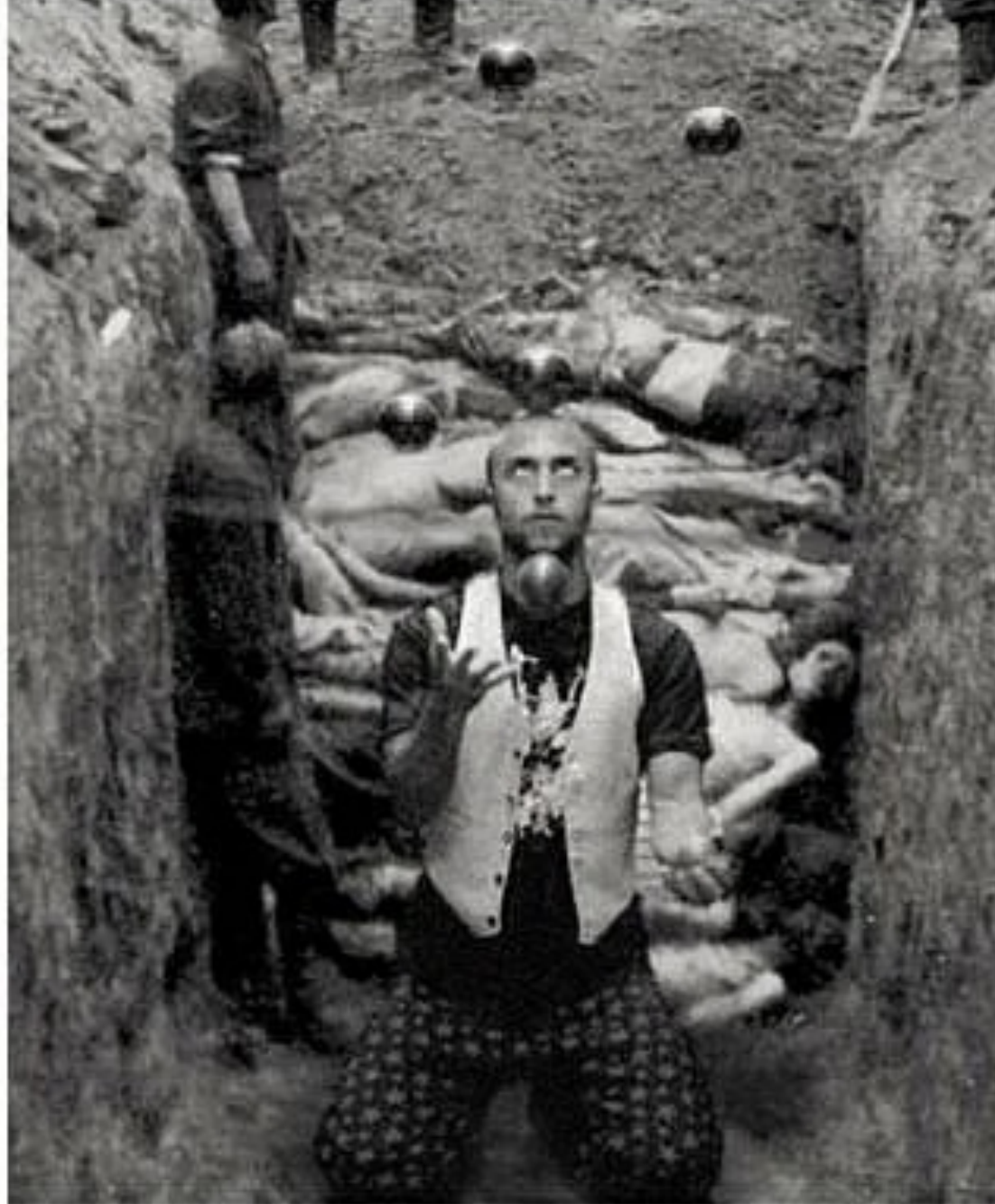
"Entering through the gate is exiting through the chimney."

Variant: "Arbeit Macht frie in Krematorium Drei."

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE HOLOCAUST AND SANTA CLAUS ?
 SANTA ENTERS THE CHIMNEY AND EXITS THE DOOR... IN THE HOLOCAUST THEY ENTERS THE DOOR AND EXITS THE CHIMNEY...



Shahak
Shapira,
“The Juggler”
YOLOCAUST
Berlin
Holocaust Memorial,
2017





Shahak Shapira, Yolocaust, 2017



Private H. Miller, The Liberation of Buchenwald, 1945.

Alan Schechner, *Self Portrait at Buchenwald: It's the Real Thing* (Digitally manipulated Photograph, 1991–1993)



Prisoners at Buchenwald during the camp's liberation by American forces, April 1945. Margaret Bourke-White



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"German Gangster"

At [Berlin Holocaust Memorial](#). 168



Shahak Shapira, YOLOCAUST, 2017

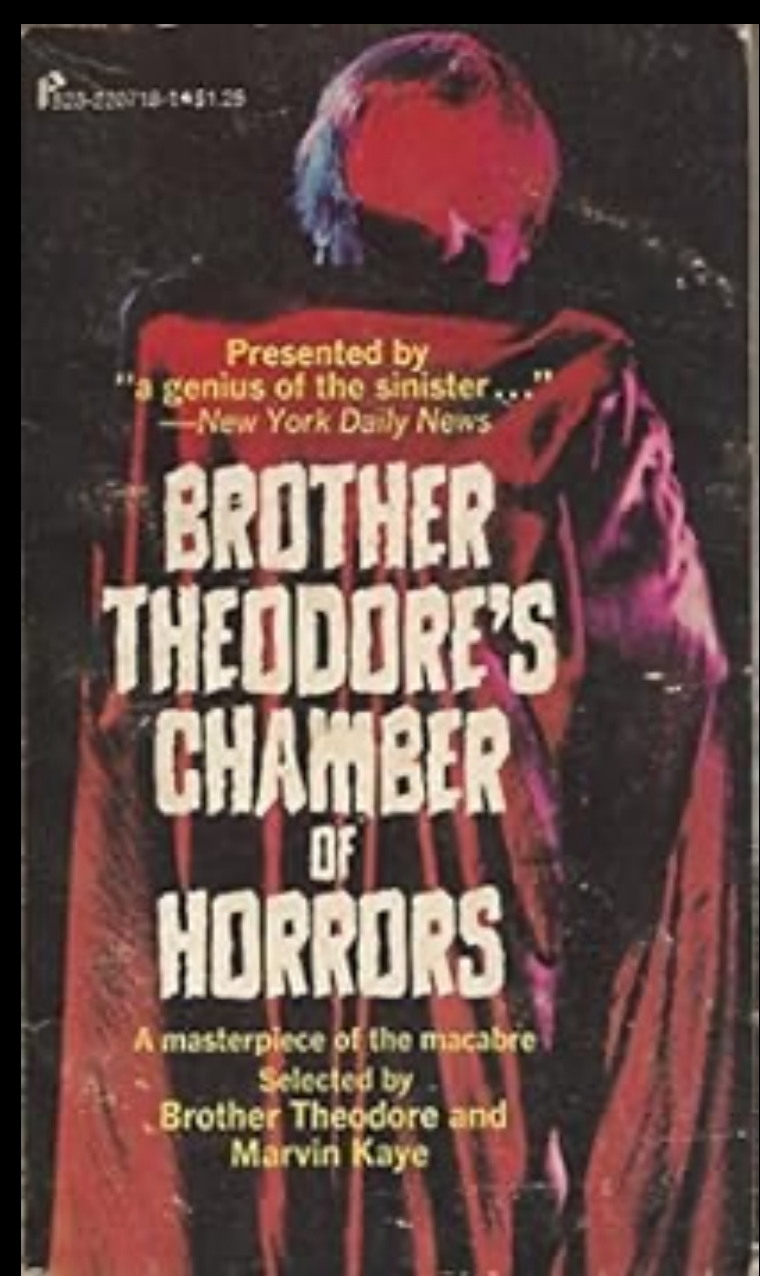
While branching out into many comic areas, Shapira's standup routine "Did you know Auschwitz has 4.5 stars on TripAdvisor?" and his hilarious parody of Bob/Bernd Ross in "The Joy of Painting Swastikas" both hit the mark as Holocaust humour for a new generation of Jewish visual culture aficionados. Rabbi Armin Langer situates this strand of Shapira's work as Galgenhumour and defense mechanism.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLwYMecqOxY>



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6D836EP_7Qk



“This world-renowned performer of gruesome humor on stage, screen and television... here shares his mordant tastes in an utterly preposterous foray into the horrible and chilling.” Blurb for Brother Theodore on Back Cover

Shapira's Jewish wit testifies to the fact that it is The "SHEER HORROR" of the Holocaust that lies BEHIND THE "COMIC FAÇADE."

But unlike 1980's "Auschwitz jokes" told by transgressive Germans, these are a vital part of 21st century Jewish visual culture as an Israeli-born German Jew tries "to come to terms with the unimaginable and unthinkable horrors that did occur at Auschwitz"

and alas.... with the "horrible things" happening today.

POSTED 28 DECEMBER 2023- Jokes but they keep getting darker...



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pkE3vIY23JU>

FULL CITATION: "As long as such jokes are told, the evil of Auschwitz will remain in the consciousness of Germans. They may seem a sorry and inadequate memorial for all the poor, wretched souls who perished of Auschwitz, but when one realizes that comedy and tragedy are two sides of the same coin, **we can perhaps understand why some contemporary Germans might need to resort to the mechanism of humor, albeit sick humor, to try to come to terms with the unimaginable and unthinkable horrors that did occur at Auschwitz.**"

Alan Dundes and Thomas Hauschild, "Auschwitz Jokes" *Western Folklore* (42, 2, Oct. 1983)

“YOU SHOULDN’T LOOK FOR
GUIDANCE FROM COMEDIANS.
WE’RE TERRIBLE PEOPLE!
WE HAVE NO CONSCIENCE. WE
HAVE NO PRINCIPLES!
WE SEE HORRIBLE THINGS
HAPPENING AND WE’RE LIKE...
(GESTURE OF WRITING THINGS
DOWN ON A PAD OF PAPER)
OH... HMM... HMM... HMM..

SHAHAK SHAPIRA

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?
v=pkE3vIY23JU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pkE3vIY23JU)

28 DECEMBER 2023



Jokes, but they keep getting DARKER 🦴 | Shahak Shapira