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The (Im)probability of the Shoah Images: the Case Study of Boris Lurie

Abstract

The article discusses the question of representing and analyzing the Shoah by images or only by words. Claude Lanzmann categorically rejected pictures of the Shoah since there is not a single photographic document of death in the gas chamber. However, Alain Resnais used photographic documents of the Shoah in his film *Night and Fog* in 1956. Lanzmann used solely the words of witnesses in his film *Shoah* in 1985, because the images are *images without imagination*.

Georges Didi-Huberman defends images as a legitimate medium for remembering the Shoah experience in his book "Images in spite of it all" about four photographs taken by a Jewish member of the *special command*.

The article analyses the example of the artist Boris Lurie: his pictures as testimonies of the truth come before words and are at a higher philosophical level. It is a matter of fact in therapeutic practice that traumatized people are able to visualize forgotten experiences long before any verbal formulation.

Taking the example of the artist Boris Lurie, the article will show that the images in his artwork were first steps in facing his trauma. It took more than 20 years after the events before he was able to return to the scene of the crime in Riga in 1976 and begin his literary confrontation with the Shoah.

Keywords: Boris Lurie, Rumbula, Riga, memoirs, memory, art of the Shoah.

French filmmaker and writer, chief editor of the journal *Les Temps Modernes* Claude Lanzmann (1925-2018) categorically rejected pictures of the Shoah since there is not a single photographic document of death in the gas chamber. Thirty years after the documentary *Night and Fog* (1956) by Alain Resnais who had used photographic documents of the Shoah, Lanzmann had principally decided against the use of archived Shoah pictures in his film *Shoah* (1985). Solely the words of witnesses stand for the memories of the Shoah, because the images are "images without imagination" (*images sans imagination*). Lanzmann writes:

> "They stifle our thinking and deaden any power of imagination. It is incomparably better to direct all energy towards generating a memory of what happened – as I have done [..] Favoring the film archives over the words of witnesses as if the archives were superior actually amounts to further disqualification of the human word in searching for the truth" (Lanzmann 2001: 274).

In the dispute with Lanzmann, philosopher and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman (b. 1953) defends images as a legitimate medium for remembering the Shoah experience in his book *Images malgré tout* (2003) [Images in spite of it all] (German: *Bilder trotz allem*, München 2007).[1] This book is about four photographs a Jewish member of the 'special command' was able to make from the crematorium V in Birkenau in August 1944 having to get the corpses from the gas chamber and taking them to the crematoriums. The photos show the burning of naked corpses and a group of naked women being herded to the gas chamber. According to the book, it is precisely the will of the Jewish victims to hand down a visual testimony that were to make the photos so valuable. They had been developed by Polish resistance fighters in Warsaw and passed on, although they are *de facto* not very meaningful, argues Didi-Huberman. Against the Nazi regime's plan to eliminate any means of testimony (strict ban on taking photographs), the act of photographic resistance is successful. It is only in 1947 that the photos appear in Cracow in the course of a lawsuit where they are, however, not accorded any evidentiary value. In 1956, they are part of the picture material for *Night and Fog* by Alain Resnais; in 1960, they are shown in Schönberner's volume *Der gelbe Stern* [The Yellow Star of David] – although their black borders are trimmed. They remained surrounded by the aura of hallowed horror; they did not turn into objects of science.

In France, but also in the German remembrance and memorial culture, the dogma was 'Sufferings and crimes inflicted in the National Socialist concentration and extermination camps are unimaginable and therefore also undepictable'. In contrast, Didi-Hubermann insists on the photographs' claim of marking a point of contact with reality:

[1]The first part of the book was done for the catalogue of the exhibition *Mémoire des camps. Photographies des camps de concentration et d'extermination nazis (1933–1999)*, taking place in Paris in 2000.

> "But precisely because the picture is not everything, it remains legitimate to say: There are pictures of the Shoah; and even if they do not tell it all – and comprise a lot less than 'the whole' – they still deserve to be viewed or considered and queried as a particular matter of fact, as testimony and part of the whole of this tragic story" (Didi-Huberman 2007: 100).

As testimonies of the truth, pictures come before words which are at a higher philosophical level. It is actually precisely in therapeutic practice that traumatized people are able to visualize forgotten experiences long before any verbal formulation. Psychoanalyst, founder of psychotraumatology in Germany, Gottfried Fischer (1944-2013) states:

> "Images are closer to the right brain hemisphere which is assumed to be able to store traumatic memories which are not yet accessible to the verbal representation of the left hemisphere" (Fischer 2000: 19).

In this respect, art proves to be a unique medium for the visualization and processing of traumata. The best chance a traumatized person has of restoring the broken bond with his inner self is to try to strike up a creative dialog with the trauma. An artist will do it symbolically by trying to objectify his trauma in his work of art. Artistic work mobilizes one's intellectual, imaginative, integrative and manual skills, it counteracts the tendency to inner disintegration. Thus, the road to the past, to the center of pain, will go via the images, which will help the traumatized person to again "develop a feeling for his identity, autonomy and his self-worth" (Dannecker 2000: 31).

Through the example of Jewish artist Boris Lurie (1924-2008), we will see that the images in his artwork which he had wrested from his own repression and forgetting were first steps in facing his trauma. It took more than 20 years after the events before he was able to return to the scene of the crime in Riga in 1975 and began his literary confrontation with the Shoah.

Rumbula memorial

This memorial was first established towards the end of the Soviet empire and dedicated to the dead Jews of Riga. In the 1960s, they were not even acknowledged. Lurie notes:

> "There is one misleading marker: '50 000 people of various nationalities, Soviet citizens, war prisoners, and others have been cruelly martyred here by Fascists.' The 'others' refers to the 40 000 murdered Jews" (Lurie 2019: 92-93).

Lurie there reflects on the borderlines of linguistic and visual memory when, for the first time, he has a close look at the hidden place where his family was shot to death (with the exception of his father) in the forest of Rumbula:

> "How will I be able to incorporate this Rumbula into my life, now that I have actually seen it? It is even worse in its real physicl smallness than in the *Götterdämmeurng* that lives in my imagination. How?" (Lurie 2019: 88)

He makes a reference to the memoirs of the sole survivor of the executions on November 30 and December 8 – Frida Michelson – and says that her book is very long, "but strangely the Rumbula execution sequence occupies only a very few pages! It is too complex, too compressed in time and space and eternity to be described by words. Maybe here another medium is needed – one not yet discovered [..]" (Lurie 2019: 92).

Boris Lurie

Boris Lurie was born in Leningrad – St. Petersburg today – on July 24, 1924 as the youngest child of the dentist Shaina and the entrepreneur Ilja Lurie. With Lenin's death and the beginning of Stalin's rule, his father abandoned his businesses in Leningrad in the same year and moved to Riga, the capital of Latvia. The family followed him in 1925. There, Boris Lurie attended the German-language Jewish private Ezra high school where he also learned English. He was also fluent in Russian and Latvian.

After Riga had been occupied by the German armed forces on July 1, 1941, persecution of the Jewish population began – with 43,672 among the 385,063 inhabitants of the city, the Jewish population made up 11.34 % (Smirin 2008: 73). Aside from the physical elimination of the Jews, the German military occupation regime had also planned the economic exploitation of the productive Jews as slave laborers. During the first raids, burning down the synagogues, more than 400 Jews burnt to death in the large choral synagogue alone, at Gogola Street 25, on July 4, 1941 (Smirin 2008: 78). A unit of the Latvian auxiliary police was placed under German supervision and helped in the raids under the command of Viktors Arajs (Smirin 2008: 74). On July 25, the reporting obligation for all Jews was introduced in preparation of setting up a ghetto which was fenced in on October 25 and locked by gates which were guarded by the Latvian special police. On November 27, a block of four streets was detached as the 'small ghetto' for approximately 4,000 to 5,000 Jews selected as being the so-called 'able to work'. In the 'large ghetto', inhabitants were ordered to gather in groups of 1,000 each for 'evacuation' from the ghetto. Room was thus supposed to be made for the first transports of Jews from the German Reich.

Since September, Lurie's family lived in the ghetto on 37 Ludzas Street:

> "Yellow and glowing in the afternoon sun. It is the only four or five-story building set amidst lower houses. [..] My stoic mother made up father's mind: it was her decision. She, my sister Jeanne, and my old grandmother will go with the evacuation. My father and I will go to the *Arbeitslager*"[2] (Lurie 2019: 79).

At the juvenile age of 17, Boris Lurie had to witness how his mother Shaina, his grand-mother and Jeanne, the younger one of his two sisters, waited in the 'large ghetto' for their 'evacuation' – which, in reality, was a deportation into the Rumbula woods, ten kilometers in south-easterly direction on the road to Daugavpils. There, they all had to undress until naked on December 8, 1941 in the middle of winter and they were shot in excavated pits. Among them, Boris Lurie's juvenile love, Ljuba Treskunova, was also killed. It was, after November 30, the second 'action' which resulted in the murder of a total of more than 30,000 Jews in Latvia – even before the death factories in Auschwitz, Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka had started their 'operation' in the spring of 1942 (Wronoski, Lurie 2014: 60).

Boris Lurie was not only very lucky to survive the ghetto in Riga and four concentration and labor camps between 1941 and 1945, but it was also thanks to his physical fitness that was appreciated by the German occupying forces, consequently making him and his father work for them. Against all probabilities, Boris Lurie was successful, together with his father Ilja, to survive for the following four years until the end of the war. They were first in the 'small ghetto', in the labor camp of the Lenta factory; then, in 1944, with the advance of Soviet troops, they were for two weeks in the concentration camp Salaspils; when the Germans retreated from Riga, they were in the transit camp Stutthof near Danzig and finally in a satellite camp of the Buchenwald concentration camp in Magdeburg, where forced laborers for the Polte ammunitions factory were housed. Lurie recalls:

> "My family was killed upon German orders; actually, the Latvians had done it, the Latvian fascists. What happened there was, for me, all like a horrible dream. I wasn't interested in the details. Later, it all came back to me. But that was much later" (Lurie 2007).

After the liberation from the Buchenwald satellite camp in Magdeburg on April 18, 1945, Lurie did not see himself as a humiliated KZ-prisoner:

> "My brother-in-law from New York [the husband of his sister Asja, who had gone to Italy in the 1930s and, before the war, had emigrated with him to New York]

[2] In the small ghetto [E. J. Gillen].

had found us and had taken me with him, and I had a position as an interpreter. I was doing very well. I was with the victors, I was not the surviving KZ-prisoner. My father was already successful as a business man, he did not want to leave at all [from Germany]" (Lurie 2007).

Lurie emigrated against his will to America in 1946 because his sister lived in New York. He did not feel at home there until the end of his life and also rejected the American way of life – driven by his profound conviction. After his arrival in New York in 1946, Lurie used pencils, chalk/crayons, charcoal pencil and drawing ink to capture, in sketches, memories, impressions, figures, scenes, portraits of the time in the ghetto and in the camps; among them a series of drawings which he called *War Series*. They are supplemented by larger formats of pastels, gouaches and oil paintings. One of the first drawings was his self-portrait *Boris Lurie, Untitled (Self Portrait), approx. 1946,* which depicts him with a grim face.

Among this *War Series* is also found a painting entitled *Portrait Of My Mother Before Shooting* (1947, oil on canvas, 93 x 65 cm). Lurie paints his mother like an apparition in a dream from a different, far-away world. Her eyes are absent as if she were already in the hereafter. In May 1996, he writes a poem with the subject of his pain over the loss of his mother:

"Where should we
fill anxieties
if mother bones are
splintered such."[3]

After his arrival in New York in 1946 (Lurie 2003: 119), the autodidact was successful – in the tradition of Alfred Kubin, James Ensor, Ludwig Meidner – in presenting impressive scenes from the camps' hell, such as *Back From Work - Prison Entrance* (1946/47, oil on canvas on fiberboard, 45 x 64 cm). The painting shows a stream of panicky prisoners who, accompanied by flame-like phenomena of light, are pulled as if by a current into the camp gate which at the same time looks like the mouth of a cremation furnace. "The world stopped to exist in this painting. Violent engulfing is the only reality" (Knigge 2003: VIII). The presentation is reminiscent of baroque paintings of hell, for instance, in the anonymous piece of folk art *Manger in the Hofburg Brixen*, showing Herod driven by devils into the gates of hell.

In another painting *Russian Prisoners Being Punished in Stutthof (Entrance)* (1946 (1940-55), oil on cardboard, 102.8 x 76.2 cm) two guards are set up at the entrance of

[3] "I stayed here (in New York), mainly because of the art. My sister lived here, otherwise I would not have gone to America at all" (Lurie 2007).

camp barracks, like sentries wearing upended waste pails as helmets and shouldered broomsticks as rifles. The prisoners called harem masters who had already given up on themselves are shown in soft, flowing forms and are dipped into a magic twilight. All these studies – still in the style of paintings of representations with surreal hints – were private paintings for Lurie which he had not wanted to put on exhibition during his lifetime. "Very briefly, I had wanted to do these illustrative memories; but then, after I learned a little in art history, I found out that illustration is not the proper art" (Lurie 2007). Instead, Lurie preferred not to transfer his experiences and memories into dramatic, theatrical scenes; thus, not historizing, namely, transferring them into symbolic imagery – as the builders of mangers do it with bad Herod who is carried on a sedan chair to the depth of hell.

Lurie attends courses in 1948 at the Arts Students' League with Reginald Marsh, a social realist, who had participated, in the 1930s, in the programs of the Federal Art Projects. George Grosz was also still teaching there at the time. But even the extreme means of expression of verism of the 1920s proved to be unsuitable to express the horrors of the camp. Lurie remembers:

> "I then[4] painted the dismembered women.[5] For me, they were all a symbol of New York – that they all are really that fat, really cut up. [...] That surely had something to do with the past, but I had not understood, at the time. Intellectually, I had not understood at all" (Lurie 2007).

Lurie's artistic work was not taken seriously by his father, sister and their friends. Lurie aptly describes the precarious existence as an artist and the ambivalent reaction by the environment:

> "Anybody who wanted to be an artist was considered to be crazy by the immigrant community – a foolish idealist who had botched his life – but nonetheless with respect because he also became a standardbearer who felt already the futility of the consumer society. Even if you had nothing, you were able to proudly say: 'I'm an artist.' First, one had to break with the bourgeois society and move to the poorest areas [..] The worse they were, the better for you [..] Reputations were not made or produced by 'investors' but rather by colleagues [..]" (Lurie: 129).

Fourteen years after the liberation in 1945, the traumatic events of his detention in the camps are deposited for the first time in his painting *Liberty or Lice* (1959/60, oil and collage on canvas, 166 x 212 cm, Israel Museum, Jerusalem). The title of the

[4]As of 1949 [E. J. Gillen].

[5]See, for example, *Dismembered Woman: The Stripper* (1955, oil on canvas, 165 x 109 cm).

painting *Liberty or Lice* may be understood as a sarcastic comment of his inner conflict between lice as a mortal threat in the camp and the promised 'Liberty' in the new, yet alien homeland of America. Present and past are here inescapably overlaid. The painting was shown in the *Les Lions* exhibition (1960). For the first time, he was able to let the stream of pictures flow freely from the past. Thus, a new form develops – unplanned – to record the flow of memories, to provide it with imagery and design.

In his memoirs *In Riga*, Lurie writes that this "painting in which you ruthlessly superimposed alternatively your past history and the experiences of the American reality of the late 1950s and early 1960s until all these disparate little chapters, covered over and extinguished in the process, jelled into a unified work [..]", inaugurated, for him, "a new art form of full and reckless and conscious sincerity and openness" (Lurie 2019: 296).[6] This new artistic method for him was arrived at "by 'unconscious' action, gesturing [triggered] by instantaneous projections of the mind, immediately fixed on canvas; and that was art, not dada or anti-art" (Lurie 2019: 296).

In the painting certain dates are mentioned. 'December 8' for the second deadly action in Rumbula against his mother, sister and lover in 1941, and 'April 18' for the day of liberation from the satellite camp in Magdeburg in 1945. In between, the name of his sister 'Jeanne' can be read. Photos are seen, for example, one of the ghetto in Riga, newspaper clippings, photographic renditions of his paintings – among them one of his *Dismembered Women*; a passport photo of the artist; the star of David on an orange-yellow patch with color gradients, such as it had been introduced by the Nazi regime, as of September 1941, as a mandatory designation of the Jews; and the photograph of his lover and wife Béatrice Lecornu, from whom he had just separated after ten years while this painting was created. All of these pieces are connected to a chaotic assemblage. These scraps of memory of the traumatic past are embedded between advertising shreds and high-heeled shoes which are reminders of an erotic shoe fetishism (as Rudolf Schlichter had made it an issue in his paintings) but which are also reminders of the collections of shoes and other belongings from prisoners in the death camps' exhibit rooms.

Souvenir pictures and consumer objects are literally mixed together in swirls of the colors white, blue and red to provide an undigested *Salad* – the title Lurie ironically provided for a collage from 1962 (oil and paper collage on canvas, 115 x 90 cm). Using the means of assemblage, Lurie picks up the new techniques of Pop Art, similarly to the way Robert Rauschenberg uses them (painting *Black Market*, 1961). Lurie incorporates everyday objects in his paintings and lets them appear like a piece from daily life and

[6] "Ruthlessly superimposed alternatively your past history and the experiences of the American reality of the late 1950s and early 1960s until all these disparate little chapters, covered over and estinguished in the process, jelled into a unified work. [...] That painting, I dare say, opened you and your art into conscious understanding of self, while also inaugurating an art form of full and reckless and conscious sincerity and openness, but arrived at via ‚inconscious' exercising, gesturing, of instantaneous projections of the mind immediately fixed on canvas; and this was art, not Dada or anti-art" (fragment from unpublished material, editor Julia Kissina).

not like serious art. Lurie welcomes these practices, as they correspond with his intention to leave the brutality of his experiences raw and undigested, and not sublimating or idealizing them.

Long before his first trip to the crime scene Riga in 1976 which was to become the trigger for the immense and impressive literary processing of the past, the initially 'unconscious' handling with pictures is already the second step to a 'conscious' understanding of his own self in his subsequent literary work. In the dream vision, visual logic of the picture is replaced by the work of compression and displacement (Didi-Huberman 2000: 153). Lurie changes the set pieces of his memory – and the images found which support and control this memory – and comes to a quest of finding new images and to a novel and unique synthesis. Reminiscing as a somatic, artistic activity is less of a reconstruction of times past but rather invention, revival, recovery, quests, reviewing, discarding, searching for traces – to observe what will emerge or crystallize and in the end a structure as a speculative assembly with an open-ended outcome, as we have seen with the example of his assemblage *Liberty or Lice*.

Lurie wanted his art to have an impact, be a driver for change, and he wanted to better understand not only his own situation, but also America, New York, his new home. As a political artist, he rejects the American imperialism. For him, that means coming to terms with the past and also the present, at the same time, in his American exile; and especially, it would mean to grapple with the 'New York Art Work Concentration Camp' (Lurie 2019: 310–312). He fights against the octopus of the art market and refuses any art practice which degrades art to a consumer good. Lurie does not want any anti-art in the sense of overcoming and dissolution of art into life; for him, art is much rather a medium for survival, a survival art or a means of life – like foodstuff.

As a survivor of the Holocaust, Lurie comes to the realization of living irrevocably in another world, on another planet, in another value system. Any understanding seems virtually impossible with contemporaries who had not experienced the Nazi camp system on their own mind and body. Possibly, it is just art alone which can build a bridge to the other side. Instead of leaving the United States,[7] Lurie – in the early 1950s still on his way to a career as a gallery artist[8] – established, together with Sam Goodman

[7]He was harboring the idea to go to France or Italy.

[8]In 1950, Lurie had his artistic 'Coming out' at New York's *Creative Gallery* with close to twenty 23 works, among them already a few of his *Dismembered Women*. Another exhibition followed, that same year, at the Barbizon Plaza Hotel. In 1952, he had another exhibition there (Wronoski 2014: 116). *The New York Times* wrote May 15, 1952: "The current show of paintings at the Hotel Barbizon Plaza contains a wide variety of work, all by one artist, Boris Lurie. His still is totally abstract though tempered at moments with visual reminisence, and he will jump from small water-color of the slow stain variety to a huge canvas that must be 15 by 10 feet and is filled with capering geometrical shapes. Color is restricted to a small number of pure tones emphasizing their strong contrasts, and forms are everywhere decisive." The article accompanied a photo of the 28-year-old Lurie in 'formal dress' with suit jacket in front of the painting *Composition* of 1952. Apparently, at that time, Lurie was on his way of becoming a quite normal, avantgarde East Coast artist "who knew how to combine willfulness and success in society" (Knigge 2003: X).

(1919–1967) and Stanley Fisher (1926–1980), the 'NO!art' movement against Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, and adamantly refused to be a part of the art market. Their exhibitions took place in the March Gallery in 10th Street – a sort of artist cooperation. For this show they published the manifesto *NO Show: Manifesto, October 8 to November 2, 1963*: "We joined forces because we felt stronger in the group. Everybody pulled another one along in the fight against the inhuman business" (Lourie 1995:49). Highlight and end of the group was the *'NO-Sculptures'* exhibition from May 12 to 30, 1964 at the Gertrude Stein Gallery with another manifesto *NO! Sculpture (Shit Sculpture), 1964, Boris Lurie Art Foundation*.

On exhibition there were piles of shit made of wire and plaster as joint works by Sam Goodman and Boris Lurie who had naturalistically painted the excrements. Each pile of shit was bearing the name of a gallerist: "Shit of Castelli", "Shit of Sonnabend".

The unexpected death of his father, Ilja Lurie, in 1964 and the end of group exhibitions of 'NO!art' effected in May of the same year, was the beginning of Lurie's withdrawal from the New York art scene: "Now, we had blown up all the bridges behind us" (Lurie 1988: 72). At that point in time, the decisions that he took as an artist were made for the rest of his life. He would never again sell any of his works; much rather, he would buy them back. He was now living from stock market speculations. "Art is art; money is money; stocks are stocks. The amalgamation of art and money is betrayal of the art" (Knigge 2003: XI).

One of Lurie's most shocking and harrowing collages is *Lolita* (1962, collage, oil on paper on canvas, 142 x 102 cm). A torn-off piece of the poster for Stanley Kubrick's movie can be seen, which was released to cinemas in early 1962. The portrait of Sue Lyon[9] is tilted by ninety degrees and rests on the bottom-most edge of the canvas. Her gaze is oriented towards a black-and-white photo glued onto the canvas in the upper left-hand corner. The photo shows dead people in barracks which had been set on fire before giving up the camp so that the inhabitants perished in the flames, while trying desperately and in vain to find a way outside from underneath the barracks wall. In her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt reported that a prison guard had lent Eichmann the novel by Vladimir Nabokov for relaxing. Eichmann returned the book with the remark that *Lolita* was a 'very unpleasant book'. We do not know whether Lurie knew that story but "it refers, like his own works, to the shift which had enabled people like Eichmann (but not only him) to present himself as an 'orderly citizen' who turns away in disgust from nudity and presentations of sexual acts, yet, at the same time, tolerates crimes of an unknown extent, or participates in them or actively effects them" (Sterngast 2016: 132).

In the United States, everybody had actually seen, at one time or another, after the war, the horrible photos by Lee Miller or Margret Bourke-White in *Life* or other maga-

[9]Boris Lurie added a sadomasochistic scene between his alter ego Bobby and a girl the same age as Lolita as chapter 57 ½ of his novel *House of Anita*, see pp. 327–333

zines, photos which had usually been placed right in the middle of advertisements by the consumer industry. After that, these photos had been forgotten again until the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961, which again turned the media attention to the genocide of European Jews. It was in that context that Susan Sontag talked about a 'certain degree of saturation' having been noticeable after the initial publication of photos from National Socialist Concentration Camps in 1945. According to her, 'empathetic' photography had "done at least as much to deaden our conscience as to stir it up" (Sontag 1980: 26).

Lurie picked up on precisely this phenomenon with his title and the collage *Saturation Painting (Buchenwald)* (1959-64, collage, photograph and newspaper on canvas, 91 x 91 cm). It shows in the center of a soiled canvas removed from a stretcher frame, a photo by Margaret Bourke-White, which she had taken on behalf of *Life* magazine after her arrival at the Buchenwald camp on April 13, 1945. The photographs were published in the magazine on May 10, 1945 for the first time. They showed prisoners in Buchenwald behind barbed wire during the liberation of the camp. The iconic picture then appeared in the *Time* magazine under the title *Grim Greeting at Buchenwald* on December 26, 1960 (Wenzel 2016: 132). Lurie had cut it out from the magazine. The photo is framed by twelve pornographic pin-up photos of a model in various poses. As if he had wanted to bring the cynicism of the American 'affluent society' – for which all needs such as love and human closeness and all pictures, irrespective of their moral significance had become products – to terms and to a concept.

The word 'saturation' targets a flood of pictures which is to stimulate wrong needs and wishes. Lurie wants to intentionally disturb in aesthetic terms the beholder of his assemblage – in the middle of an art operation which, due to its commercialization, constantly devalues the contents of artistic work which is important for its survival. The destruction of bodies in the Nazi KZ-system is propagated in the devaluation of beauty, sensuality and sexuality of women in the capitalistic process of exploitation which subjects everything to the laws of profit. Lurie brings this context here to the point long before Pier Paolo Pasolini's criticism of liberal democracy when he contended that the Italian clerical fascism had developed into a consumeristic and permissive capitalism or, respectively, a hedonistic fascism (Pasolini 1998). Analogously, Joseph Beuys had also compared Auschwitz with the subtle destruction of creativity and individuality in capitalism.[10]

In parallel with the famous exhibition *The Art of Assemblage* (MoMA, October 2 to 12, 1961), for which Alfred Barr, Jr. and his curator William Seitz had already selected works by Lurie which were finally not even shown, the probably most disturbing work was created by Boris Lurie *Flatcar, Assemblage, 1945, by Adolf Hitler* (1961, offset print, 41 x 61 cm). Lurie here used an anonymous photo, which had long been

[10]Cf. Tisdall, Beuys (1979: 21).

ascribed to Margaret Bourke-White, with the photo caption indicating Adolf Hitler as the author of an assemblage consisting of naked corpses thrown pell-mell one over the other onto the open flatbed of a trailer. The photo as an offset print remains unchanged in its art work; Lurie's only intervention is the title. Lurie treats the photo as a find, a ready made.

Around 1960, at a point in time in which autonomous art increasingly threatened to dissolve in action or performance art – which, in the 1960s, aimed at the cancellation of the difference between art and life – Boris Lurie declared Adolf Hitler as the greatest performance artist. Because – if art is to be transferred to life – then Hitler had been the greatest and most powerfully efficient artist, the artist with the most far-reaching consequences. With his example of extreme conceptual art, Lurie demonstrates the fatal consequences of a political avantgarde of the 1960s which demanded action instead of analysis.

In his work *Railroad to America* (1963, painting/collage, photo on canvas, 55,5 x 68 cm), Hitler's assemblage is being commented by Lurie, so to speak, by the confrontation of the catafalque with a pin-up photo pasted over it which shows the rear of a young woman who is about to take off her panties. The beholder is speechless in disbelief in front of this collage – this confrontation of life and death which is in the tradition of the baroque vanitas symbolism. Is it a commentary to the brutal, thoughtless combination of the Shoah documents with advertisements in magazines during the post-war period?

Another Lurie's work *Hard Writings (Load)* (1972, collage, photograph and adhesive tape on paper on canvas, 60 x 88 cm) operates with the aesthetics of advertising signs, shop window decorations.

Theodor W. Adorno researched exactly this kind of cynic culture industry. After his return to Frankfurt am Main, Adorno refused – as is well-known – any reconciliation with the past and demanded an uncompromising negation of the conditions or circumstances which had made Auschwitz possible. From artwork, he expected that it "always and rigorously sounds out the meaningful context" and turns "against this meaning and against meaning at all" (Adorno 1970: 229).

Boris Lurie also used all his energy not to give meaning to his experiences with the Shoah, and instead snatch it from oblivion and spread it, before his audience, in his collages without any principle of order – to thus present it in its overall brutality and atrocity. History is not being clarified here to come to any conclusion; instead, history will be short circuited with the present:

> "In that world, there was sublimation just as little as there had been any idea of love which – irrespective of the marketing of (female) bodies and lust or desire – would still be conceivable. Art was [..] destruction, was self-destruction with its own means, and therein, at the same time – paradoxically – self-assertion" (Knigge 2003: VIII).

In a poem of February 1985, Lurie brings this insight to the point:

"Three separate lines - -
what beautiful is ugly, what ugly is still beautiful!
oh give me a little bit of time for pain!
I love the Parisian prostitutes" (Lurie 2003: 13).

In his *Involvement Show Statement* to the *Involvement Show* at the March Gallery of April 1961, Lurie makes it clear that 'all aesthetic standards' are without any significance for him. "At a time of wars and destruction, any aesthetic exercises and decorative punctuations are inappropriate" (Lurie, Krim 1961: 39). Lurie declared very precisely:

> "We want to create art, not destroy it, but state clearly what we mean – and that at the cost of good manners. Here, you will not find any secret languages, no refined excuses, no quiet discretions, no messages addressed to select listeners. Art is a tool of influences and warnings. We want to speak, shout, so that everybody can understand it. Truth is our teacher. We want no platitudes and sophistries, deception, conceit, lies" (Lurie, Krim 1961: 39).

Lurie wants to save the hidden, that which is seemingly already deleted, lost or forgotten in our memory.

In another, third step following the illustrations of his memories around 1946/47 and the collages since 1959, Boris Lurie is successful in the transformation of traumas into the language of literature – triggered by his first visit *In Riga* in 1975,[11] namely, the encounter with the site of his humiliations and nightmares. In the 1990s until his death in 2008, Lurie was working on his novel *House of Anita* which was published posthumously in English in 2010.[12] The story unfolds in New York in a domina studio which is, at the same time, a posh, high-class gallery. There are four dominas and four slaves. The house is no prison, everybody is voluntarily a part. Anita, the boss, is a gallerist at the same time. Gallerists are dominas, the artists are slaves who are subjected to the gallerists. Among them are the Germans Hans and Fritz, who can remember – although reluctantly – their childhood in Hamburg and Posen; the air raids on the metropolis on the river Elbe, and the escape from Poland. As opposed to the two Germans, Bobby is

[11] Cf. *House of Anita*, New York 2016.

[12] Boris Lurie, *House of Anita*, New York 2016. See: Wolkenkratzer, Klagewände. Boris Lurie's pornographic novel *House of Anita*, compiled by Julia Kissina. Collaboration Norbert Wehr. With contributions and translations by Ingolf Hoppmann, Julia Kissina, Olga Kouvchinnikova, Boris Lurie, Stefan Ripplinger, Joseph Schneberg and Geraldine Spiekermann (2018: 119-154). A Russian edition of the book exists; German and Latvian editions are planned.

an alternative concept – Lurie's alter ego. A trauma wiped out his memory of 'who he is and where he comes from'. Then, there is Aldo, the kapo:[13]

> "Our fourth man who was drafted to service. Aldo, he was very different from all of us. He was wearing women's clothes and could move freely around, by day and night in the entire apartment. Gradually, Aldo took on warden duties from the domina Anita; he even wrote the daily work schedule" (Lurie 2016: 51-54).[14]

It's a matter of the seductive, erotic power of relationships between the victim and the perpetrator,[15] which is transferred to the relationship of male/female gallerists and male/female artists on the American art market and which Lurie experiences as the continuation of that which he had felt and experienced in the KZ-system of the Nazi-regime. The artists and their works are only consumer goods for the amusement of the neo-aristocratic New York snobs; they have to offer their goods on the art market much like the proletarians offer their labor. Lurie's comparison of the capitalistic art market with the KZ-system goes right to the core of the American capitalism.

Finally, in chapter 50, Bobby – who, contrary to his alter ego Lurie, is a slave artist completely adapted to the system – is visited in his domina-gallery studio by five corpses:

> "An ancient woman, fast asleep; a handsome middle-aged woman, sitting errect and unflinching; a lovely round, innocent-looking girl of about sixteen; a tiny child, unattended on the floor, but carefully bundled up for warmth; and a young soldier-boy. All seemed spotlessly clean, but no question about it – the smell emanated from them.[16] And each posessed a pronounced mark between the eyes, that of a big bloody wound" (Lurie 2016: 198).

Bobby asks them where they come from. The older woman answers: "A Seventh-Day Adventist from the countryside near Rumbula. And Comrade Stalin. An unlikely team, don't you think?'" Bobby answers with a stutter: "'Rumb? Where is, ah...

[13]Designation for a functional prisoner who was employed by the camp management in German concentration camps and who supervised other prisoners. He received benefits for it, such as alcohol or access to camp brothels. Kapos could also be Jewish prisoners, but also political and criminal prisoners. The word origin is in dispute. It might be derived from the Italian *il capo* – 'for leader'.

[14] See German translation in: Ripplinger, Stefan; Milch, Vergossene.

[15] Theme used e.g. in Liliana Cavani's film *Der Nachtwächter*, 1974.

[16]According to the memoirs by Frida Michelson (*I Survived Rumbuli*, 1982), apparently one of three survivors of the executions of Rumbula, the 'travelers' wore their best, cleaned clothes on the route from the large ghetto to Rumbula (Lurie 2016: 204). Lurie's literary image of living corpses refers to reports that – after the executions – naked people wandered about through the forest, in vain looking for help. Professor Ezergailis: "The pit itself was still alive; bleeding and writhing bodies were regaining consciousness. [...] Moans and whimpers could be heard well into the night. Hundreds must have smothered under the weight of human flesh" (Lurie 2016: 320).

Rum...whatever.' 'Very far away,' she smiled. A drop of blood from the open hole in her forehead began coursing down her face. 'How could you know, Bobenka? You never bothered to learn about it.' [..] 'You should have repeated them to yourself three times a day, for your whole life'" (Lurie 2016: 198-205).

Despite the admonitions, Bobby still does not understand why these dead travelers have come to New York. In their further dialog, it becomes evident that one of the women is his mother, the others apparently his grand-mother, his sister, lover and himself. His mother holds western liberalism responsible for the Nazi victory:

> "I was a medical doctor, trained at a time when there were hardly any female doctors in the west. But the liberals lost all control over Hitler; they kept rather aloof and had the Russians fight it out with the Germans. Liberalism brought about the pits for corpses. The fascist pits for corpses had me go over to Stalin."[17]

Thus, it was not the liberal West but Stalin and the Soviet Union which liberated the camps under huge losses in life. The estimated number of the dead is approximately 27 million.

But of course, said his mother, "'We do not know this. We died on December 8, 1941'" (Lurie 2016: 202).

His lover Ljuba Treskunova throws Bobby in his face:

> "You see I am and always will be sixteen and beautiful! Beautiful as a heroine, immortalized in the drama of Rumbula. But you? YOU will never be sixteen again! You will remain a dideous old slave, licking the boots of the Americans for the rest of your life. Licking boots, no less thoroughly, than you did those of the Germans before them, for four years' [..]" (Lurie 2016: 208).

The mother accuses him of having left his lover for the Goddess of Slavery. Bobby answers:

> "How could I have known what choices lay ahead? Instinct to survive had taken me by the hand, and led me in the wrong direction. [..] I cry aloud. I would have been happier being one with you, From the very start. But was I not led by God? Was it really the Goddess of Slavery who took me? All I know is that I followed – like a lamb – to a different kind of slaughter" (Lurie 2016: 209).

It is only now that the painful truth gradually reaches Bobby – that he is a survivor of the camps. This is tied in with the traumatic experience of having survived by

[17] Cited acc. to the German translation (Ripplinger 2018: 132).

chance – in view of the excessive number of victims.[18]

The domina and gallerist Anita welcomes the corpses from Bobby's past; but they stink: "'Bobby, take them to the service bathroom for disinfection at once. Wash and scrub! Carbolic soap' [..]." Regarding Bobby's objection that the stench would certainly stay forever – despite scrubbing and showering – Anita answers: "'These relics of the past must be relegated to where they belong – to contemporary Art, not in Life. These guests are welcome visitors, Bobby. They are Art-treasures. Soon they will have no hint of odor except that of the museum'" (Lurie 2016: 229).[19]

In Boris Lurie's imagination, the art market – in the form of galleries – is a gigantic laundromat which will clean art down to the deep pores of all traces of history and individual suffering. In the end, "anything offensive will get the odor-free form of goods or money. Pecunia non olet. The gallerist Ms. Polanitzer says: 'Money wipes it all off – as if by magic – the past as well as the present.' [Art makes] corpses disappear by exhibiting them" (Ripplinger 2018: 132).

Contrary to Lurie, Bobby subjects himself to the powerful curator Dr. Geldpayer (allusion to Henry Geldzahler) and explains "How clear will it be for me that the highest level of civilization is subjection, i.e. unquestionable acceptance of the historic events [..]" (Ripplinger 2018: 132). Boris Lurie considered this continuation of slavery, suffered under the conditions of capitalism, to be worse and more humiliating than the real concentration camp. That's also why he called New York a 'World Art Concentration Camp' (Lurie 2019: 310-312).

In the 1960s and early 1970s, the novel *House of Anita* was preceded by a series of disturbing sadomasochistic paintings and collages, which Lurie had called *Love Series.*[20]

Resume

[18]Theodor W. Adorno described this trauma of life in his *Negative Dialektik*: "In retribution, dreams haunt him such as that he was no longer alive but had been gassed in 1944 and that his entire existence thereafter was merely in his imagination; emanation of the mad desire of a person murdered twenty years ago. [...] The guilt of life [...] according to statistics, supplementing an overwhelming number of murdered people by a minimum number of people rescued [...] can no longer be reconciled with life. That guilt is reproducing incessantly [...]. That, and nothing else will force one to turn to philosophy" (Adorno 1975: 355).

[19] "'Sie sind Kunstschätze. Bald werden sie keinen Geruch mehr an sich haben, außer dem des Museums'" (Ripplinger 2018: 132).

[20]See, for example *Slave* (1962–73, collage, paper, paint and varnish on paper, 56 x 79 cm)*, Love Series: Bound on Red Background* (1962, collage in transfer technique: photograph and paint on canvas, 203 x 135 cm)*, Untitled, undated* (collage, oil and paintings on canvas, 61 x 46 cm)*, Love Series* (1970-72, photograph, brushed over with paint, 15 x 17 cm)*, Love Series (Tripple Bound)* (1962, photomechanical enlargement of a newspaper illustration and oil on canvas, 40 x 100 cm); all illustrated in: 'NO!art', exh. cat. of NGBK (1995: 33).

In the mid-1960s, Adorno revised his ban of the early 1950s – regarding the writing of poems after Auschwitz – in the sentence that in art after Auschwitz "the perennial suffering [...] has as much the right to expression as the tortured one has to scream" (Adorno 1975: 355).[21] The art of the Shoah is beyond all aesthetics and beyond all artistic taste, it has the right to scream. Screaming as an expression of amorphousness and ugliness was in the classicist aesthetic still a severe violation of the rules, thus prompting Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in his work *Laocoon or on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766) to explicitly discourage its use by the artist, because a mouth opened wide in screams of pain would essentially be disfiguring and unsightly.

However, art of the Shoah is beyond such assessments and rules. It not only recurs to reality, facts or a photo documentary character. It also gives form to the invisible, the pain and the feelings. Even hearing inner voices and seeing hallucinations are phenomena of reality for the artists of the Shoah, as they are showing the collapse of reality.

The assessment made by Primo Levi in 1986 half a year prior to his alleged suicide on April 4, 1987, in his final book *The Drowned and the Saved* also applies to Boris Lurie: The survivor of the Shoah is branded by his experience so that he never really survived, but is imprisoned in this experience; and until his actual death, he can do nothing but write, paint, express and remember that which actually cannot be expressed, as if being compelled to do so.

Thus, the pain incurred can never be sublimated, symbolized or historized. This is why, after a few years already, Lurie abandoned the attempt of illustrating his traumata with the means of traditional, narrative painting (1946-1950). The experiences made in the past remain unresolved – standing without explanation, barren in all their naked brutality. Following the death of Boris Lurie, we still have to deal with them further. This art of the Shoah, based on the experience of Auschwitz, escapes all explanation and interpretation. It must be 'suffered' as it encompasses the experience of absolute "revocation of the basic solidarity shown by one human being to another, as human beings from Germany towards the German and European Jews. [..] It does not aim at compassion, but rather at fright" (Knigge 2003: XIII).

But this art of the Shoah also knows that it will never be able to convey the death experience of the Shoah. There are no pictures of death in the gas chamber, death is invisible because nobody survived the gas chamber and is able to bear witness thereof. This also goes for the death of Lurie's family in the forest of Rumbula. Their death is the blind spot in Lurie's pictures and texts. His description in the novel *House of Anita* is sur-real. His reaction to the first encounter with Rumbula is the desire to die or go the way of grief, namely, the via dolorosa, to Rumbula:

[21]The quote continues: "Thus it might have been wrong to say that no poem could be written after Auschwitz" (Adorno 1975: 355).

> "To kneel, Japanese style, and put a knife in your stomach [..] Yes, this is the only way to incorporate Rumbula or to be incorporated into it. I see myself like a penitent Christian, every year on the Eighth of December, carrying a huge wooden Star-of-David all the way from Ludzas Street to Rumbula. The people stop and stare as I collapse, and get up again, stumbling under my heavy weight" (Lurie 2019: 89).

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