

ArtReview

The Neoliberal Fantasy of 'The Brutalist'

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The Brutalist, dir. Brady Corbet, 2024. Courtesy Universal Pictures UK

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The film's reductive portrayal of an exploited creative 'genius' places individuation as the defining feature of existence

“Which parts of me do you find most beautiful?” a sex worker asks László Tóth, the fictional Hungarian Jewish architect at the center of the writer and director Brady Corbet’s new film *The Brutalist*. “My arse; is that what you like? You think it’s beautiful?” Trousers unbuckled and hanging from his hips, he replies: “Very. It’s the space above your brow for me which is the problem.” Tóth has just arrived in the US in the late-1940s, having survived the Holocaust and made the great journey overseas in search of a new life. In Europe, he trained at the Bauhaus, we’re told, and completed several commissions in his native Budapest in the modernist International Style the school came to be associated with. But in a very *un-Bauhaus* way, the film repeatedly couches Tóth’s benchmarks of successful design – of successful *anything* – in a hackneyed language of the ‘beautiful’ versus the ‘ugly’. In fact, the actual Bauhaus set out to question and overturn, among other things, the ideology of beauty successfully propagated by the bourgeoisie for over a century. For the group, highly subjective language like that of the beautiful was a symptom of the privileged class’ emphasis on the relativism of individual taste. The criteria of the beautiful and the ugly becomes a weapon of cultural and economic domination when it is not relative at all, but monopolised by the wealthy, requiring the authority of great power to impose it on culture-at-large.

From that intimate start onwards, Tóth, played with brow-furrowed intensity by Adrien Brody, is depicted as a passionate though rather weakened man, not one whose pronouncements carry much weight beyond other characters’ recitations

of his resume. Over the course of the film's opening act, he is a victim of poverty, a blooming heroin addiction, his baiting *shiksa* cousin-in-law, and the fickle overtures of a pompous, lock-jawed Main Line Philadelphia heir to a vast industrial fortune, played by Joe Alwyn. The film's second half focuses on this heir's volatile, arrogant, antisemitic father, the goading but charismatic Harrison Lee Van Buren, as Tóth's harpy cum malignant patron, a role performed by master of sneer Guy Pearce (recall his career-making role as the cutting drag queen Alicia Jollygoodfellow in the 1994 camp classic of acerbic put downs, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*). For a while, Van Buren's manipulative treatment of Tóth is tempered by the long-awaited arrival of the architect's steely but charming wife Erzsébet, a journalist confined to a wheelchair due to malnourishment suffered during and after the war, looked after by the couple's mute niece Zsófia. Felicity Jones lends great sensitivity to the "marginalized wife of a genius" character but is destined to remain a perennial onlooker to Tóth's world.





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The film's concerns – xenophobia, the humiliations of penury and indigence, artistic vision versus the compromise of patronage, the shame and secrecy of drug addiction, the uneasy connections between lovers traumatised by war, antisemitism – are glancingly reflected in the character's inner lives, and are understood even less in their words, however admirably the talented cast imbues the sometimes-stilted dialogue and frequently improbable scenarios with emotional expression. Soon after their heartfelt reunion on a train platform, the steadfastly pragmatic Erzsébet, in a totally out-of-character scene, self-piteously asks if her disability or aging are the causes of Tóth's sexual aloofness, a condition that the film implies, albeit without consistency, may be an opioid-induced lack of libido. So why then does she recriminate herself like an insecure twit? This is but one of several such instances where characters' motivations are drawn quite hazily. At over three-and-a-half hours, the film's cramming in of so many storylines in its baggy length seems to imply its leads' inconsistent actions arise from the boundless complexities of Holocaust trauma, yet the roles lack persuasive depth or emotional authenticity, coming across as lazy characterisation.

The backstories of the two leads are similarly confused. Tóth and Erzsébet are said to have been imprisoned at the Buchenwald (in Weimar, Germany) and Dachau (near Munich) concentration camps, though when nearly 600,000 Hungarian Jews were murdered upon the Nazi invasion of the country in March 1944, they were with slender exception shipped by train to the considerably closer Auschwitz extermination camp in southern Poland. Why not just say Auschwitz? This is but one of the film's several historical glitches, and I shall call them glitches so as not seem pedantic in naming them historical *errors*: glitches jolting viewers out of the film's grand arc, which also include a strangely Edwardian scene of immigrants with large numbered tags around their necks at Ellis Island that feels distant from its 1945-48 moment, and free jazz incongruously playing at a circa 1950 club. Not to mention that 'Brutalism' was in fact coined by British architects Alison and Peter Smithson in 1953, and remained largely associated with the UK until the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Enough 'glitch'. Another whopping mistake: the Euro-Jewish architect-designers who emigrated to the US were an extremely successful bunch, an indication that antisemitism was not the barrier to success the film's plot is predicated on. Though importantly, unlike the devout Tóth, these men were converts to Christianity (Marcel Breuer, László Moholy-Nagy, Rudolf Schindler) or lapsed in their religion (Louis Kahn, Richard Neutra). The film is also intent on sidestepping the true history of Zionist settlers in Palestine, how Jewish architects as a group went to Tel Aviv, like fellow Bauhaus alums the Zionists Arie Sharon, Munio Weinraub, Shmuel Mestechkin and Shlomo Bernstein, to construct the so-called White City, a group of over 4,000 International Style and IS-descended buildings. This looseness with detail reveals an indolent

relationship with the specific or merely inconvenient evidence of history. I'm not talking about the poetic license of Sofia Coppola's arch anachronisms (Marie Antoinette dancing to New Order); it simply feels that little to none of *The Brutalist's* eleven-million-dollar budget went to factchecking or constructing accurate chronologies about things that matter to some, like the Holocaust, architecture, jazz, etc.



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So we go on: characters nod seriously as they make avowals of *this* beauty and *that* ugliness, but what in fact is this beautiful-ugly stuff? According to *The Brutalist*,

the Beautiful includes: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe-inspired tubular steel cantilever chairs, Alvar Aalto-like pale wood paneling, tall ceilings, concrete, Tóth's drawings and blue-veined Carrera marble. The Ugly: chintz, low ceilings and Pennsylvania granite. Alas, taste without argument is ultimately arbitrary. When Van Buren asks Tóth to design a *beautiful* combined cultural centre and Protestant church dedicated to the tycoon's recently deceased mother, Tóth is initially flattered then almost totally overcome by his patron's demands. Van Buren immediately installs cost-cutting minions on the project, including his spoiled son, who undermine Tóth and prompt him to earmark part of his own salary towards construction. Eventually the mercurial patron tanks the commission after a catastrophic railroad accident damages the building's steel enroute from Charleston, West Virginia (a city well known for its coal, not steel production; why not say *Pittsburgh?*). Years later, a momentarily repentant Van Buren sends his lawyer to fetch Tóth, now working as an anonymous draftsman at a big NYC firm, only for him to be quite literally brutalized by Van Buren as the architect fruitlessly attempts to bring the project to completion. Of the 'creative' pursuits, architecture is among the most dependent on big piles of capital in order to get its work off the ground: patronage is a constitutive yoke of the profession. Much like filmmaking, which is perhaps why the movie finds sympathy in a tale of concession and economic exploitation.

And yet, there *is* an architectural community, not just cruel rich people. Who and where is *this* character's community? The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argued that the field of cultural production is the dominated section of the dominant class, one that *nonetheless* self-defines its legitimating principles. These principles often invert the logic of its overlords, who privilege economic success above all. The

community of cultural producers, though sometimes locked in competitive struggles with one another, still in practice define the criteria and limits of their field. Not in Hollywood, where the ‘genius’ struggle is one of lonely betrayal, a neoliberal tendency by the dominant bourgeois class to nominate individuation as the defining feature of existence: no longer the class of the people, but of the person.



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Yet we *know* that the real Bauhaus faculty helped their colleagues and students

gain a foothold in the US, in this film the bogeymen of ‘antisemitism’ and ‘the Holocaust’ enact the neoliberal fantasy of total social, cultural and professional anomie, and of the complete subjection of human warmth and artistic creativity to capital, while also participating in what philosopher Zygmunt Bauman pointed to as Western modernity’s comforting narrative of the ‘evil’ exceptionalism of Nazism. In wholly eliminating the European-trained émigré architectural community, the film leaves Tóth bereft, even though he was once obviously supremely well connected in Budapest, enough so to be awarded many commissions by the age of thirty-four, a veritable wunderkind! But in any master-slave dynamic, or creativity-as-victim-of-patronage narrative, there is a dialectic in which power runs multifariously, though of course never equally. Tóth’s vision, principles, forms; in sum, his architectural technique, are never given enough screen time to demonstrate their power. Game over: architectural community loses, capitalism wins.

At the Bauhaus, it took nearly ten years and the departure of founding director Walter Gropius for an architecture program to be inaugurated. In those early years, the Bauhaus leadership considered architecture the summation of the school’s training in foundational design and workshop production – metal and woodworking, 2D and 3D design, glass and textile production, theatre and graphic design, among others pursuits. The criterion of ‘good design’ was defined as the dynamic reinvention of spatial relations following from the study of the material constitution and visual appearance of form. In rejecting the loaded ideology of beauty, the Bauhaus (and its offshoots like School of Design in Ulm, Black Mountain College in North Carolina, *Műhely* in Budapest and New Bauhaus in Chicago, to name a few) emphasised a near-laboratory study of the

constitutive elements of perception and the material means to execute dynamic design in innovative form.

If anything, penultimate Bauhaus director Hannes Meyer, and especially faculty like Ludwig Hilberseimer, moved so far beyond beauty (or perhaps better stated, beyond the perceptual effects of dynamism as affective pleasure) into a manner of building according to utility to be considered straight-up functionalists. Final Bauhaus director Mies eschewed the language of beauty for different reasons, underscored instead values of harmony and simplicity expressed in fundamental, structural geometries using materially-efficient means. This was a project pushed further by the Smithsons' work, which, according to British architectural critic Reyner Banham's influential 1955 essay on Brutalism, valued relatively cheap materials such as concrete in post-WWII European reconstruction 'for their inherent qualities "as found"'.



The final moments of the film include a brief epilogue that abruptly jumps to the 1980 Architectural Biennale in Venice, where Tóth's work, last we saw abandoned, is miraculously feted by the now very articulate older Zsófia, puzzlingly standing next to the same actress who acted the role of the young Zsófia. A montage of many other buildings Tóth completed after the Van Buren project is shown, drawings which were in actuality generated by AI then hand-rendered by the film's production team, which are (dare I say) *ugly* things that look exactly like what one would imagine AI's idea of brutalism to be: illogical mashups of Philip Johnson, Louis Kahn and fellow Hungarian Jew Marcel Breuer's designs. Zsófia reveals (or asserts, as it isn't entirely clear if we are to believe her) that Tóth's Van Buren center was a Trojan horse of sorts: secretly designed according to the proportions of the Buchenwald prison, only employing taller ceilings (the ones he used his design fee to pay for).

The film ends with Zsófia stating that her uncle believed in the "destination, not the journey", which patly inverts a slogan from a Toyota commercial, itself one that riffs on words by Ralph Waldo Emerson found on many an inspirational poster. It is also an enormously self-defeating claim made in a film that has journeyed a helluva long time through melodrama and rarely glanced at actual architecture, which – beautiful or not – was presumably Tóth's 'destination'.

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