

The Brutalist: A Holocaust survivor reclaims his life

David Walsh
28 February 2025

The Brutalist is a drama about a Hungarian-Jewish architect, a survivor of a Nazi concentration camp, who emigrates to the US following World War II and struggles to rebuild his life, his art and his relationships with others, including his wife. The film, directed by Brady Corbet, who co-wrote the script with Mona Fastvold, has been nominated for ten Academy Awards (including best picture, best director, best actor, best supporting actress and best supporting actor). The critics and the Academy voters, in this case as in others, ask too little and enthuse too easily.

Adrien Brody plays László Tóth, once a major figure in European modernist architecture trained at the Bauhaus school in Germany, who lands in America damaged and impoverished. He initially stays, in poor circumstances, with his cousin in Philadelphia, who owns a furniture store. Tóth learns that his wife Erzsébet and her niece Zsófia are still alive, but encountering bureaucratic hurdles in their efforts to join him in the US.

Tóth comes into contact with Harrison Van Buren (Guy Pearce), a wealthy cargo ship manufacturer, who hires him to create a memorial for his mother in the form of a community center, including a library, a theater and a chapel, on a hillside in rural Pennsylvania.

Erzsébet (Felicity Jones), now in a wheelchair, and Zsófia (Raffey Cassidy), mute because of her wartime experiences, eventually arrive. Tóth and his wife have an understandably difficult time at first, with all that has gone on. He is also a drug addict by this point.

The grand project encounters various difficulties, including Van Buren's going behind Tóth's back to consult with other architects, Tóth's own obstinacy and, disastrously, a rail accident that puts them years behind schedule.

By the time the project is restarted, Tóth is working as a draughtsman in New York, Erzsébet is a journalist and Zsófia, having recovered the power of speech, announces that she and her husband are moving to Israel.

A visit to Italy by Tóth and Van Buren to purchase Carrara marble precipitates a crisis. Van Buren pours out his hostility and sexually assaults Tóth. This embitters the latter, who, once back in the US, is harsh with his crew and his wife. He has come to realize, he tells Erzsébet, they are not welcome in the US. Other dramas ensue, including Erzsébet's confronting and denouncing Van Buren. An epilogue, set in 1980 at the Venice Biennale where Tóth is being honored, suggests that he has known success and recognition.

There is interesting and promising potential here. Corbet and Fastvold are ambitious. They have created a 202-minute film, excluding a 15-minute intermission, filmed in VistaVision, a wide-screen variant of 35 mm film developed in the 1950s.

The Brutalist takes up the consequences of the Second World War and the Holocaust, the character of postwar American society, the incompatibility of the artist and the capitalist, along with drug problems, antisemitism, Zionism and other matters.

Unfortunately, these issues are dealt with in an inadequate and confused fashion, significantly, perhaps fatally, limiting the value of the work. The

final, overwrought portion of *The Brutalist* in particular goes very seriously awry. There are striking images and certain convincing performances, but on the whole the filmmakers seem very much out of their depth. The work is starved of genuine historical and social insight.

Along with everything else, the implication that Zionism or Jewish messianism is a solution to the Tóth's unhappiness in America (what about everyone else's unhappiness, incidentally?) seems a cruel mockery under the present circumstances.

LÁSZLÓ: The people here, they do not want us here. ... We are nothing. Worse than nothing.

And later

ERZSÉBET: You were right. This place is rotten. The landscape. The food we eat. This whole country is rotten. I'm going to Israel to be with Zsófia and her child.

Zionist nationalism has proven a catastrophe, as Marxists always argued it would be, for the Palestinians, the Jewish people and the world.

There are many problems with *The Brutalist*, but they generally revolve around its abstract, thin, ahistorical character, its inability to confront or even acknowledge the great events of the 20th century, which would have shaped the consciousness of an artist such as Tóth. History in the Corbet film is reduced to a series of terrible, senseless things happening (along the lines of Schopenhauer's "universal human tragedy").

Corbet began his career as an actor. It is difficult to know the extent to which he determined the shape of his own career, but it is not encouraging that he performed in one of Michael Haneke's more deplorable and misanthropic films, *Funny Games*, and in the *always* deplorable Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*. Russian filmmaker Alexander Sokurov (*Russian Ark*, *Moloch*, *Taurus*, *The Sun*), a specialist in muddy, anti-historical works, seems another unfortunate influence.

The Brutalist is a historical film with almost no concrete history or historical reference points, taking place during a period (1947-1960) of explosive developments in the US and globally; a film about artists and intellectuals who barely discuss art and intellectual problems. The dialogue and drama are very limited, murky, almost purely psychological (the film is about "reclaiming one's physical body," according to co-writer Fastvold). There is no real sense provided of the historical and social dimensions of fascism, the world war. Events are reduced to a horrifying, traumatic personal experience that one either does or does not work through as an individual.

The character of Tóth is apparently inspired by various figures,

including Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, László Moholy-Nagy, Marcel Breuer and Ern? Goldfinger. Taken as a whole, this group of artists and architects was deeply affected by the First World War and the revolutionary wave that followed its conclusion, the collapse of the German and Austro-Hungarian empires and the October Revolution in Russia—and, ultimately, the Stalinist counter-revolution and the rise of fascism.

Soviet-developed Constructivism was an immense inspiration, as was the general effort in the USSR in its early days to create housing and public buildings with the needs of wide layers of the population in mind.

The Bauhaus school and broader artistic movement, from which Tóth is supposed to have emerged, had a definite socialistic tendency, originating in the radical, insurgent conditions prevailing in Germany in 1919. As the WSWS wrote on the occasion of its centenary, the great contemporary interest in the Bauhaus:

does not lie merely in the forms of modern design it developed and propagated or the simple, functional architecture that was to largely characterise the 20th century—until its replacement by postmodernist conceptions of design. Above all, what makes Bauhaus special is its notion of combining many forms of artistic work and unleashing the creative power made possible by collective work.

Specifically, Moholy-Nagy was a supporter of the 1919 Hungarian revolution that briefly established a workers' republic, and was strongly influenced by the Soviet artists Malevich and El Lissitzky in the 1920s. Goldfinger was a prominent left-winger, who migrated to Britain in the 1930s and, decades later, designed new offices for the *Daily Worker* and headquarters of the British Communist Party. The Bauhaus school during the period when it was located in Dessau had a strong Communist influence, including in the person of its director Hannes Meyer. It was eventually shut down by the Nazis, and many of its leading figures fled Germany.

For that matter, brutalism as an architectural aesthetic or “ethic,” as some insisted, developed in the 1950s in Europe. The term does not derive from “brutality,” but from “béton brut,” the French term for “raw” or exposed concrete. Moreover, brutalism was associated with socialists or social reformers at the time, like British architects Alison and Peter Smithson.

Where most architects build on top of their skeletons, Brutalism leaves the foundation exposed, creating a look its proponents have alternately designated as honest, authentic, raw. ... Brutalism is influenced by the ideas of socialist thinkers and revolutionaries. Rejecting the luscious decorations of bourgeois apartment buildings and royal palaces, Brutalist architects were deeply concerned with providing quality housing for the working class, and sought to design buildings that would close class distinctions rather than widen them. (Artnet.com)

There isn't a hint of this history in *The Brutalist*. Or perhaps one should say that there is precisely *a* hint. In a conversation with Van Buren, Tóth observes that:

When the terrible recollections of what happened in Europe have ceased to humiliate us, I expect them to serve instead as a political

stimulus, sparking the upheavals that so frequently occur in the cycles of peoplehood.

But this goes nowhere.

Instead, we get a diversionary, unhelpful insistence on a quasi-Nietzschean “extremism” as a thing in itself. Corbet asserted, in an interview, that “making something [artistic] requires a level of obsession that always borders on the unhealthy.” He complained in the same conversation that “there's not a real appetite for very transgressive or radical or ambitious movies anymore.”

He told another interviewer:

There are many neorealist films I love, but that's not what this is, and it's not what I do. We were making a film that's set in the 1950s, in the style of a 1950s melodrama.

By not a “neorealist film,” Corbet seems to suggest that he is not bound by historical realities in any important sense. He refers favorably, in that second interview, to “a handful of writers who have this feeling for history that is in the text that transcends the linear nature of the way that we've been taught history, where it's just basically dates and events, cause and effect.” His partner Fastvold intervenes mockingly: “This is a fact. This is what happened' ... I mean, there's of course facts, but when you start writing history, it all becomes slightly fiction as well. There are always details and parts of it that are ...” Corbet interjects, “...invented by the storyteller.”

Along these lines, one of the weakest plot conceits of *The Brutalist*, and this is giving away one of its final secrets, is that the Pennsylvania memorial project turns out to be designed to resemble a concentration camp. As Zsófia explains in the epilogue, the memorial

referenced his [Tóth's] time at Buchenwald as well as the deeply felt absence of his wife, my Aunt Erzsébet. For this project, he re-imagined the camp's claustrophobic interior cells with precisely the same dimensions as his own place of imprisonment.

This is a morbid and inappropriate conception. Above all, it reveals a lack of seriousness or inexperience on the part of the filmmakers, their ideological dilettantism and distance from their ostensible subject matter. Those who survived or escaped Nazism, indeed the most conscious artistic representatives of one or more entire generations, made it their life's work not to shadow fascist oppression, but to create, in form, content and spirit, its diametrical opposite.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact