

# The Most Serious Film Ever Made

By Theodore Dalrymple

H.L. Mencken once said that no one ever went broke underestimating the taste of the American public, but the American public of his time was full of Lorenzos the Magnificent by comparison with the British public of today.

This public resolutely rejects all refinement or beauty, or the exercise of its intelligence—which is why I hardly ever go to my local cinema in England, which shows mainly Hollywood's stupidest and most violent products, even short trailers of which seem to put my mind through the mental equivalent of a cement mixer. I avert my eyes and clutch my ears to avoid seeing and hearing them.



Adrien Brody in *The Brutalist*

However, the cinema recently showed (for one screening only) *The Brutalist*, a film widely praised and that, insofar as its main character was a Brutalist architect, touched on a subject, Brutalist architecture, that interested me.

I thought it was an abominable film in all respects. I feared that it might glorify Brutalism, the ugliest and most totalitarian of all architectural styles, and to a certain extent it did just that. By making its fictional hero a refugee from the Holocaust who wins through, against all the odds, to build Brutalist buildings in America and elsewhere, it insinuates that this type of building has some kind of

connection to political freedom, when in fact the very reverse is the case.

Le Corbusier, one of the founders of Brutalism, was a supporter of French fascism who early in the Nazi occupation of Paris wrote a little book suggesting that the majority of the population of the city should be deported to the countryside because, in his opinion, they had no good reason to be in Paris. In fact, he was more propagandist for his nasty ideas than he ever was architect; and when you read him, your first question is, how could anybody have ever taken this rubbish seriously? Insofar as I have an answer, it is that the First World War so dislocated people's thoughts (understandably so) that they were looking for a guru who wrote and spoke in a gnostic fashion.

It is ironic that the fictional hero of the film, supposedly a fighter for freedom, should be depicted as having designed a chaise longue that is a very close replica of Le Corbusier's. Of course, as Freud once said, a cigar is sometimes just a cigar, and by analogy a chaise longue is just a chaise longue. But the film insinuates that the design is a symbol of free spirit, when in fact it was first designed by a virulent opponent, even hater, of freedom: a man whose style of architecture was best captured by O'Brien in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* when he described the future. "If you want a picture of the future," O'Brien said, "imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever." That is a Brutalist building for you, a boot stamping on a human face, and a person who designs such a building is no hero of mine.

But the film is abominable in all other respects, too. Apart from a certain mendacity about architecture, it has many defects. It is far too long, suggesting the director's undisciplined love affair with his own ideas. It has slight anachronisms that I found irritating. For example, early in the film it shows a blue sky, completely clear apart from an aircraft contrail, most unlikely to have formed in 1945, when

the scene is supposed to have taken place. I do not believe, either, that anyone at that time would have used the locution "significant others" for relatives of a refugee who had just joined him in America in the 1940s. But these are small defects.

Perhaps it is a sign of my age and loss of auditory acuity, but I found much of the dialogue mumbled and difficult to follow. If it is argued that, in real life, people often mumble, I would reply that art is not the slave of real life. Chekhov, for example, conveyed boredom without being boring.

There were gratuitous (and boring) sex scenes in the film that were quite unnecessary to the plot, that conveyed nothing essential and could have been informative only to people who did not know what sex is or entails. The director seemed to drag these scenes in to show how liberated he was, or how enlightened, fifty years after *Last Tango in Paris*.

But the worst was the film's solemn effort to be serious and significant. There was no humor in it: So lacking in confidence were the filmmakers in their own claim to high seriousness or significance that there was hardly a smile in it, let alone a laugh or a joke. Some people, among them the makers of this film, seem unable to tell the difference between solemnity and seriousness, just as they cannot tell the difference between frivolity and lightheartedness.

The film's script was a complete gallimaufry of themes. First there was the Holocaust, which now always stands guarantee of profundity both of feeling and of subject matter; then there was a medley of architectural design and patronage, wealth and poverty, homosexual rape and heroin addiction. I was reminded of the traditional schoolboy excuse for not having handed in his homework: He was ill, there was no ink, the dog ate it, the cleaner burnt it, *and* it flew out of the window. The schoolboy thinks that the more excuses, the better; the less he will be blamed. He does not yet understand that a single

simple excuse has a better chance of being believed, even if false, than a whole concatenation of excuses, each of which is in contradiction to the others.

In like fashion, the makers of the film supposed that if they put enough serious subjects into it, the film would become not only serious, but *very, very*, or even *maximally* serious, possibly the most serious film ever made.

Now, heroin addiction and homosexual rape are undoubtedly serious subjects, but seriousness is not like a set of weights such that if you add one to another, the combined weight is greater. If heroin addiction is a serious matter and architectural design is a serious matter, they do not become twice as serious if combined in some way or other.

Pretentiousness is almost as unpleasing as outright stupidity. I left the cinema with a relief similar to that which I feel after a visit to the dentist.

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