

G. B. PIRANESI AND THE BRUTALISM OF *THE BRUTALIST*

Abstract

I discuss here the thoughts and theories connecting G. B. Piranesi, the Venetian eighteenth century inventor of impossible architectural forms like his famous *Carceri*, the rough style in architecture, initiated in the middle of the twentieth century in England, called brutalism, and the theme of the 2024 film entitled *The Brutalist*, centred on dramatic architectural ideas. There is a striking similarity between the rationalistic architectural theories of the enlightened eighteenth century and those of modern brutalism. Finally, it is interesting to explore and assess Piranesi's position in this matter.

Keywords: Brutalism, Le Corbusier, *béton-brut*, Piranesi, Algarotti, Lodoli, functionality, patronage, prisons, Buchenwald, truth, beauty, originality, ornaments.

I shall start by saying a few words about *The Brutalist* directed by Brady Corbet who won the Silver Lion in Venice in 2024. In addition the film received several prizes including three Oscars, one for Adrian Brody, in the role of the architect, as the best actor, and three Golden Globes. It is a film with a strong ethical dimension and, briefly speaking, is an allegory on architecture reflecting the dramatic vicissitudes of a Jewish Hungarian architect who survived the traumatic experiences of Buchenwald extermination camp. I will not enter into the details of this unusually long film (about 3 hours and 30 minutes) where the architect's wife, a survivor of the Dachau camp, now confined to a wheelchair, the aphasia of his niece who lost her power of speech after her own experiences in the same camp, the sexual impotence of the architect himself, all hint at a brutal, repressive and unredeemable world.

In this film the architect emigrates to the United States in 1947, after the war, taking with him his deep anguish, and physical pain which forces him to find relief in drugs. He also takes with him the ultimately fallacious dream of a better world in the United States. After many troubles and humiliations he is commissioned by a wealthy, sympathetic patron, full of enthusiasm for the originality and genius of this architect. The architect had already achieved renown in the circle of the famous school of the Bauhaus in Germany. At last he could realize his *magnum opus* in the expressive brutalist style, due to the patronage of an apparently enlightened patron. However the patron is absorbed mainly in exploiting the talent of the architect.

The title of the film *The Brutalist* plays on its ambiguous meaning. Its heavy negative connotations induce one to think that it deals totally with some kind of crude subject. It recalls visions of a brutal world inhabited almost entirely by brutes, but one soon realises nevertheless that its main focus is in the architectural style called brutalism, with all its symbolic expressionistic connotations. So *The Brutalist* of the title, taken in its architectural sense, must refer to the architect himself who practices in the style of brutalism. On the other hand if one understands, erroneously, the word brutalist as deriving from the term brutal, one could identify the brutalist of the film with some other character who acts in a brutal way, as for instance the patron himself.

Brutalism derives its name not from the English word brutal but from the French word *brut* used also for dry champagne. It appears that the word in French can refer to something dry, authentic, not disguised, true to its essence, in this case, cement, the *béton*, the *béton-brut*, rough, untreated cement. So it has not in its origin such a negative meaning as it has in English or Italian, for example. Brutalism, a construction without ornamentation, advocates notions such as the application of reason, function and truth to architecture. The term *béton brut* in

architecture was first used by Le Corbusier (1887-1965) at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Brutalism is the style adopted in the film by the architect to create a vast multifunctional building on the top of a hill. A community centre including even an area dedicated to spiritual devotions with a Christian altar made significantly of Carrara marble, in contrast with the grey cement of the building. The cross is cleverly projected onto the altar through the dome above. The symbol of the cross is generously used in the film seen from different angles, sometimes as a sign of charity, and not of justice, sometimes as a hope of salvation, sometimes, seen upside down, indicating the opposite. The cross cut in the cement in Tadao Ando's *Church of the Light* in Japan (1989) served as an inspiration.

In the film *The Brutalist*, unlike Ando's church where the cross is cut on the eastern perpendicular wall, the light comes from above as the architect had experienced in his prison in Buchenwald. The shape of the cross, with its strong symbolism, is also recalled in the overall layout of the building. All this is in memory of the dear mother of the patron. The patron nevertheless develops in the film as an increasingly hypocritical figure, sordid to the point of raping the drugged architect in Carrara.

It is true that, despite the rather positive meaning that *brut* can have in French, the *béton*, the cement, was not called *beau*. Beauty is not in the forefront of this architectural style. If any beauty appears, it must derive from the rational application of functionality true to the material used.

The Bauhaus school which advocated the rational modernist style, pioneered by Le Corbusier, used reinforced concrete, that is, the *béton-brut*, but in a gentle manner by covering it with

white plaster. The Bauhaus was closed in Germany in 1933 by the Nazi regime, and many of that school then emigrated to America, like the protagonist of the film *The Brutalist* who built his community centre near rapidly industrializing Philadelphia.

Reinforced concrete opened the possibility of revolutionary inventions in architecture, where the principles advocated by the Roman architect Vitruvius in the first century B. C., such as *soliditas* (solidity), *utilitas* (utility, function), and *venustas* (beauty), are not immediately detectable, so that all that then aimed at balance and a sense of peace, could now be easily denied. In fact, with the use of reinforced concrete one can dispense with symmetry and harmony, as one can see in extreme instances in very original shocking Chaos architecture.

It is in the heroically impoverished post-war Great Britain that brutalism was first used in the middle of the twentieth century. Its austere, poor and expressionist style at times evokes the feeling of Munch's painting *The Scream*.

Novelty and originality are two notions dear to the brutalist style, but it seems that the novelty one can achieve lies in the invention of rough, untreated reinforced concrete and not so much in its architectural theory.

According to Corbet, *The Fountainhead*, the film directed by King Vidor (1949), based on the script by Ayn Rand, was an important source of inspiration for the making of his film. This appears to be true not only for visual scenes, such as that of the marble quarry, but also for the subject which deals with a heroic architect, played by Gary Cooper, who in the name of principles such as originality of inventions, and stern creativity, with uncompromising integrity,

fighters against the traditional styles of American architecture, from Neogothic to Neoclassical buildings of Palladian memory.

In *The Fountainhead* two very original architects, a master and his pupil (Gary Cooper) have much trouble to have their projects approved by potential patrons. They are too original, their inventions are too revolutionary. The master, weak and unable to fight, at last is dying assisted by his brave pupil. His last emphatic words are: 'The form of a building must follow its function'. And in these passionate words pronounced as a total novelty by the defeated architect, who in the film appears as a sacrificial victim of conformist society, one seems to hear an echo of old eighteenth century theories on architecture defended by Carlo Lodoli (1690-1761).

Carlo Lodoli, the Venetian Franciscan, intellectual and educator, wrote most notably about architecture, although his radical and revolutionary written work did not reach us. Nevertheless, his ideas were first divulged but also made less radical by his pupil, the enlightened polymath Francesco Algarotti (1712-1764) in his essay on Architecture of 1756. Reason dominates Lodoli's arguments and the notion of function in architecture is at its core. Away with all superfluous non functional superstructures, such as ornaments and decorations. Away with false visual effects, the architect must be faithful to the material used just in the name of truth. Stone is stone and must not imitate wood, for example. Algarotti relates Lodoli's ideas:

Niente vi ha di più assurdo, quanto il far sì che una materia non significhi se stessa, ma ne debba significare un'altra. Cotesto è un porre la maschera, anzi un continuo mentire.

On the other hand when in the name of truth one has to sacrifice beauty, according to Algarotti, it is better to lie: 'questo sarà ancora il caso di dire: che del vero più bella è la menzogna'.

G. B. Piranesi (1720-1778), the wonderful etcher famous for his views of Rome and the cryptic series of prints of the *Carceri*, found himself in great harmony with Algarotti's taste. Algarotti acted as a mediator between baroque phantasies and the new, rigorous architectural principles supported by Lodoli which we can find also in theories of brutalism.

Piranesi would have loved to be a full time architect. But only once he was engaged as such in the restructuring of S. Maria del Priorato of the Knights of Malta on the Aventine hill in Rome. Here though the great passion that animated Piranesi's polemical architectural theories, concerning imitation and originality of inventions, as expressed in his *Parere su l'Architettura* (1765), was not much in evidence. Nevertheless in S. Maria del Priorato, Piranesi was able to liberate his imagination in the use of ornaments. Piranesi, unlike the austere rationalistic principles of Lodoli, and centuries later of the brutalists, believed in the beauty and the symbolism of ornaments. He loved ornaments not only for their form but also for their historic value as quotations from authoritative antiquity, and overall for their significance.

Piranesi in his *Ragionamento Apologetico in difesa dell'Architettura Egizia e Toscana* of 1769, again defends the generous use of non-functional ornaments, considered superfluous by the rationalists of his time, and ours. He wrote:

A certi genj dunque che la povertà delle loro idee rende più del dovere amanti della semplicità, sembrerà forse, che di troppi ornamenti vadino carichi questi miei disegni e mi si tornerà a rinfacciare il detto di Montesquieu, che un edificio carico d'ornamenti é un enigma per gli occhi, come un poema confuso lo é per la mente...

Earlier, Piranesi, in his *Della Magnificenza ed Architettura de' Romani* of 1761, had advanced arguments against the rationalists to the extent that, by depriving buildings of non essential elements, one would return to a basic construction: the primitive hut theorized by Marc-Antoine Laugier (1713-1769).

Non v'ho io detto, che a fare un edificio secondo que' principi che vi siete posti in capo, cioè di far tutto con ragione e verità, vi vorreste ridurre a stare in tante capanne?

Indeed Piranesi had expressed an even more drastic paradoxical ironic idea in the *Parere* aiming at a total elimination of all architectural elements. Here in the dialogue between Protopiro and Didascalò, the latter who supports Piranesi's theories says:

E io distruggerò tutto. Mettete da parte, Edifizj senza pareti, senza colonne, senza pilastri, senza fregi, senza cornici, senza volte, senza tetti; piazza, piazza, campagna rasa.

Beside the concept of truth, that of originality in architecture is dominant in both *The Brutalist* and *The Fountainhead*. In the latter we hear these words: 'the creator thinks the parasite copies'. These ideas that in the two films are presented as heroic modern conquests we also find in the past, as for instance in eighteenth century discussions on architecture. The quotations by Piranesi in his *Parere* with their strong emphasis on originality come to mind. Here Piranesi argues for the variety of inventions and against the practice of imitation leading to an unbearable monotony. What would architecture be reduced to without variety, Piranesi asks: and his answer is a quotation from the French architect Julien-David Le Roy (1724-1803): *A un vil métier où l'on ne feroit que copier*, in other words: just to a vile profession where one would only copy. Here we find exactly the same idea as in *The Fountainhead*.

For Piranesi Nature is a never-ending source of inspiration. It is in Nature, continually changing into new forms, that he finds the fundamental teaching concerning variety. He quotes in his *Parere* from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (book XV): *ex aliis alias reddit natura figuras*. It is also in nature that he can find examples of his beloved curved patterns, disliked by the eighteenth century lovers of severe straight lines and by recent brutalists who prefer angular solutions.

Piranesi, in his *Parere*, uses another quotation, this time from the Roman historian Sallust to exalt his own capacity of novelty, and to accuse his critics of sloth: *Novitatem meam contem- nunt ego illorum ignaviam*. In other words: they despise my originality I despise their idleness.

In this quotation from Sallust though, we can detect two relevant meanings. The most evident one, as we saw, refers to the practice of architecture, the argument discussed in the *Parere*, and therefore puts its emphasis on the notion of novelty and originality. But Piranesi, in adapting Sallust's words to his polemical aims, was well aware of the original meaning of the word *novitatem* in this Latin context. Sallust refers to Gaius Marius, *homo novus*, and puts a speech in his mouth in which Marius after having received the command of the war against Jugurtha compares his humble origins and also his own capacities with the vain haughtiness of the old patricians. This argument is also relevant to Piranesi who felt himself as a sort of *homo novus* humiliated by his supercilious patron, Lord Charlemont, who had withdrawn his support for the publication of the *Antichità Romane*. Piranesi ultimately dedicated to Lord Charlemont and to his dealer John Parker, a tomb which appears in the last plate of his *Carceri d'Invenzione* (1761), with the ominous Latin inscription IMPIETATI ET MALIS ARTIBVS. This inscription is not a quotation but an original invention by Piranesi. It refers to the two figures on the headstone of the grave, condemned by Piranesi for ever in a tomb in a prison. They sinned for using evil arts instead of protecting the fine arts.

Piranesi's admiration for ancient Roman architecture is well known, and we can see it also in the etchings of his *Carceri*, and even in the headstone of the grave, just mentioned, which indicates a *damnatio memoriae* of those who instead of protecting are ready to exploit artists.

Both the fictitious character of the architect in the film, and the real Piranesi, were in conflict with their respective patrons. It is all about the old problem of confronting creativity and genius against exploitative power and money.

Regarding architecture, it is clear that Piranesi would have not liked the brutalism of the brutalists. The closest he could get to brutalism, Piranesi could find in ancient Roman constructions, such as the Servian walls in Rome, made of natural naked stone blocks. Here though, instead of poverty Piranesi would have worshipped the engineering ability of the past and seen its everlasting magnificence.

The film *The Brutalist* ends with an epilogue which summarizes some twenty years of the life of the Hungarian architect. The scene takes place in Venice at the festival of architecture of 1980, dedicated to him, significantly entitled *The Presence of the Past*. In this epilogue at last it is revealed in words by his niece, that the *magnum opus* of the architect embodies 'the camp's claustrophobic interior cells' inspired by his past experiences suffered in Buchenwald by him, and in Dachau by his wife, haunting memories always present in his mind. In the film the architect, by now decrepit and confined to a wheelchair, listens to his niece lecturing on the secret meaning of his *magnum opus*, especially 'the dramatic heights of the glass roof' in contrast with the claustrophobic cells. This height of twenty metres is meant to inspire thoughts of

‘freedom of identity’ in the visitors, as the light glimpsed above the imprisoned architect had meant hope of life and freedom.

The architect relives his past as a victim of an unjust society, and somehow in his architectural vision he expresses a protest against that society and his brutal patron. The theme of the brutality of patronage is stressed in the film, and finally explodes towards the end in a dramatic scene. The guilty patron who had exercised his power over the architect to the point of raping him, is accused openly of being a rapist by the wife of the architect. As a consequence, the patron escapes and meets his death in the secret cells of the building itself.

In the same way Piranesi, who had fought so much to vindicate his freedom as an artist, and for this reason was even threatened with prison, found space to implement justice and condemn an unfair, humiliating patronage in his *Carceri d’Invenzione*.