

# Visual Essay: Between *Brutocapitalism* and the Scarcity of Life

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## Abstract

**Background:** The recent Hollywood super-production “The Brutalist” (2024), scripted, produced and directed by American actor and filmmaker Brady Corbet, takes us on a journey through the story of László Tóth, a Hungarian architect and Holocaust survivor who immigrates to the United States in search of a new start for his life shattered by the Post-World War II Period (1939-1945). In this visual essay, however, the suffering of the fictional narrative constructed by Corbet will not be the focus of discussion. On the contrary, it will be the starting point [**and the objective**] so that it becomes possible to criticize and weave, in a simultaneous and multimodal way, the concepts of “brutalism” and “capitalism”, here named “*brutocapitalism*” (neological fusion between the two lexicons). As a consequence, we will approach the thinking of Achille Mbembe—in his book “*Brutalisme*” (2020)—and arrive at the space of the possibility of presenting a set of sensibilities highlighted and put into evidence by the authors of this essay. **As an experiential result**, it was possible to perceive the similarities between the opacity and barbarity experienced by the majority of human bodies when the inevitable encounter between brutalism (in its many senses, including architectural and artistic) and capital (especially that linked to its entrenched “-ism”, as a suffocating suffix)—specifically, in the metropolitan (geographical) region of Recife, in Pernambuco. **The main techniques** used in this process were painting on canvas, using photography *per se*, manipulating images and superimposing images, whether photographic or not; authorial or not.

## Keywords

*Brutocapitalism*, Opacity, Barbarity, Photography, Painting

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## 1. Ramblings, Elucubrations and Meanings

### Thoughts

The title of the production identified in **Figure 1**, represents the idea of chaos in

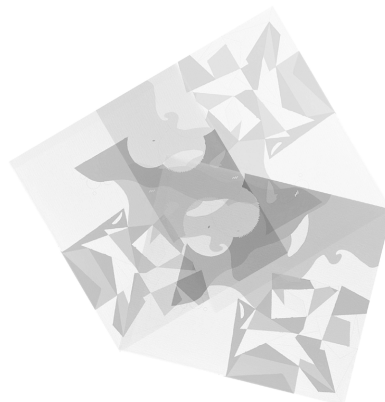
simplified Chinese. This is an important semiotic understanding for the development and articulation between the parts of this essay.



**Figure 1.** Hǔnlùn | Painting on white fabric canvas, with MDF plywood chassis (dimensions 30 × 30 mm), and use of PVA Acrylic Paint | Production context: post-experience with the audiovisual production “The Brutalist” (Corbet, 2024). Painting and Photography: Lucas Sávio Freire da Silva Oliveira.

## 2. Trenches and Grouting

They call me László Tóth  
I'm a middle-aged man  
Hungarian, in the process of immigrating.  
I left my family behind during this process (Figure 2)  
The war takes a lot out of us.



**Figure 2.** Brutalist experiments | Painting on white fabric canvas, with MDF plywood chassis (dimensions 30 × 50 mm), and use of PVA Acrylic Paint | Production context: post-experience with the audiovisual production “The Brutalist” (Corbet, 2024). Painting, Photography and Overlapping of Photographs: Lucas Sávio Freire da Silva Oliveira.

Architecture was my great craft  
Until I arrived in New York  
And experienced the dark side of the future American dream.  
I became a handyman

Or a handy-man to survive.  
 Letters were what kept my memories alive:  
 From home, from Erzsébet, from Zsófia.  
 It's hard to leave precious things behind.  
 But I don't hesitate to tell you what was easy to leave behind:  
 Buchenwald.  
 The space they built between an I and an Other  
 The abyss that separated me from my place  
 The structure they erected to challenge my architecture of escape.  
 The survival that seems to have been a loss  
 And the loss that needs to become.

### 3. Crossroads between Theoretical Frameworks and Methodological Interchanges

We will title this section “Crossroads between theoretical frameworks and methodological interchanges” due to the scientific nature of this work. As this is a “Visual Essay”, its structure differs considerably from the standard format adopted by journals that publish articles in the more traditional format of scientific communication, separated by predefined axes. In this sense, we will begin by combining, in this section, both the theoretical framework and the methodology adopted in the study, as we believe these are two points that are inextricably linked throughout the work. As a result of research initiated by Irwin at the University of British Columbia, Art-Based Educational Research, or simply Art-Based Research, has become established in the scientific and educational field of visual arts to meet demands that traditional research methods were no longer able to satisfy.

In this sense, [Irwin \(2013\)](#) reports that this theoretical-methodological typology of work invests and collaborates solely in a somatization of results that science, in its archaic methods, is unable to provide to contemporary demands. This is also defended by [Dias \(2013\)](#), Rita Irwin's work partner and disseminator of her ideas in Brazil. According to the author, in professions that employ this challenging scientific way of thinking, organizing, executing, and systematizing results, it is of utmost importance to consider that the term “Visual” does not appear in the concept merely as a characteristic that can be discarded at any time. For him, the image, within the scope of an “Essay”, assumes a co-protagonist role. It will speak for itself; it will be equivalent, in value, to words—something corroborated by [Gradim \(2007\)](#).

In the “Essay”, then, defined by [Meneghetti \(2011\)](#) as a process that involves a system of involvement that is sometimes objective and sometimes subjective between subject and object, in a dynamic of inseparability between them, visibility flits between this relationship. Regarding “Essay”, it is also important to know that [Meneghetti \(2011\)](#) assumes that, for its full understanding—that is, an understanding critically situated in time and space—the subject must be detached, to the maximum extent possible, from assumptions and prejudices ([Karnal & Fernandes, 2023](#)) of any kind, free from the formalisms of science ([Meneghetti, 2011](#): p. 321).

Still on the notion of “Essay”, we bring up [Boorstin's \(1995\)](#) postulates. Accord-

ing to the author, this type of document (let us call it that) presents itself, above all, as a structuring of feelings, sensations, (un)certainities, conjectures, and contradictions that an individual could, at a given moment, ponder about something. This something would then reach other individuals, who, in turn, could repeat the same process while paying attention to the document. However, it is important to bring up Lukács' (1911) reflections on the typology of the "Essay" and, along with them, Adorno's (1986) observations. According to the authors, Meneghetti and Boorstin's argument is not entirely wrong. However, it is necessary to state that the "Essay" is not about scribbles on any piece of paper, mere ideas and conjectures about some subject. It requires technical and scientific rigor, which has not yet traveled and reached the path and stability that its sister, poetry, has (Lukács, 1911).

In this sense, we arrive at the point where it is possible to merge the conceptually explained parts to define the concept of "Visual Essay", insofar as the two terms of its composition have been explained. "Visual Essay", in this sense, will discuss phenomena—especially contemporary ones—which science, in its formalism, is unable to communicate in a way that has a significant impact on the reader of a research paper, since the image, *per se*, according to Pétursdóttir & Olsen (2014), has a visuality that amplifies the repercussion of the work, because it triggers more human sensoriality, as well as revealing a consequence of the researcher's engagement with the object, constituting the development of the essay as the result of the work itself.

In this sense of result, we rely on the work of Zilberberg (2006), who describes, among other things, the construction of meanings in different textual types and genres—something that includes those of a scientific nature. For the author, multimediotics depend solely on the reader's immersion and capacity for poetic involvement (in its broadest sense) in work—especially those of an artistic nature, which challenge the human need to schematize and rationalize understandings that, by their very nature, can only be felt through sensory experiences.

If you would like to experience some visual essays that have already been conceived, constructed, and disseminated scientifically, we recommend consulting the materials "Banca", by Pazetto & Nunes (2023), published in 2023 by the journal PÓS, linked to and edited by the School of Fine Arts of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (EBA/UFGM), Brazil, as well as the essays "Nós", by Luana Navarro (Navarro, 2016), and "Do exercício de pesquisa e criações e suas notas cartográficas", by Pablo Paniagua (Paniagua, 2016), both published in 2016 by Revista Apotheke, linked to the Postgraduate Program in Visual Arts at the State University of Santa Catarina (PPGAV/UDESC), Brazil, organized specifically by the Apotheke Painting Studio Study Group, from the same institution.

#### **4. Brutocapitalism**

For Mbembe (2020), even though the word "brutalism", in the field of arts and architecture, has obtained the status of a concept, because it represents specific ways of acting, thinking or moving, it would be foolish to reflect on it (and discuss

it) without separating it from the political field, especially the economic aspect that it has: responsible for feeding back, for example, a system of building construction that is at the service, among others, of the economic and cultural circulation of a *pólis*.

A movement that emerged in the mid-1950s in England, due to the period of wars that resulted in massive and irreparable destruction of buildings in much of Europe, Brutalism and its journey to the place of idealization, however, is not unanimous in academic circles, nor is it or will it be the concern of this essay. However, a few reflections are in order to make this work appear as an edible supper, albeit one that is hard to swallow.

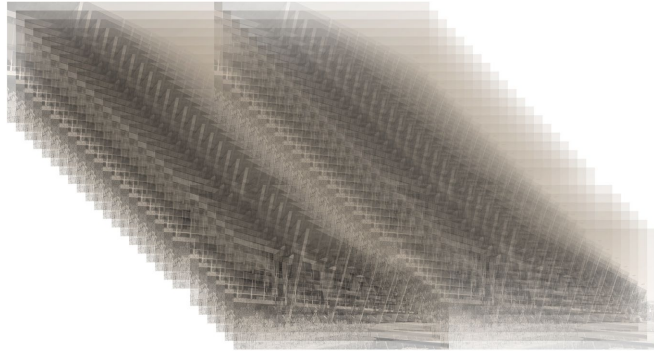
In a study conducted by Barroso (2022), we are challenged to visualize two giant walls, parallel to each other, and provoked to imagine, between them, a canyon, capable of instigating us to search for the still uncertain becoming (Deleuze & Guattari, 2002) of brutalism: 1) was it a “new” movement resulting from Alison and Peter Smithson’s concern to [re]erect English civilization drastically bombarded by one of the greatest conflicts of the 20th century, seeking to [re]establish, essentially, human dignity and, consequently, housing, [re]giving the people significant hope?

Or 2) such brutalism would be—as verified in closer convictions—temporally—linked to the need to create a “new” building style, focused on exposing “[...] exaggerated and heavy volumetries, emphasized by the “honest” use of building materials” (Barroso, 2022: p. 2)—essentially emphasizing the raw nature of the materials, with *béton brut* (intentional emphasis on the expression of French origin, which carries the accolade of probably having influenced the creation of the lexicon “brutalism”, which means nothing more than “raw cement”; “concrete”) as the core and the plumb line of the work, without giving any concern to finishes or coatings? In order to reflect progressively and advance in the understanding of the construct undertaken here, see Figures 3-5 of this essay.



**Figure 3.** Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro, designed by Affonso Eduardo Reidy in 1952. The first recorded appearance of Brutalist architecture in Brazil. Credit: Halley Pacheco de Oliveira/MAM Rio de Janeiro. Fonte:

<https://grupoindusparquet.com.br/noticias/arquitetura-brutalista/>.



**Figure 4.** Photographic overlay (Photograph by Halley Pacheco de Oliveira/MAM Rio de Janeiro) of the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro, designed by Affonso Eduardo Reidy in 1952. The first recorded appearance of Brutalist architecture in Brazil—represented and referenced, in color and without digital manipulation, in **Figure 3** of this essay | Image Editing, Manipulation, and Overlay: Lucas Sávio Freire da Silva Oliveira.



**Figure 5.** “My ruin, My non-life” or “Az én romom, Az élettelenységem” (Photographs). Technique of superimposing photographs, taken in the city of Camaragibe, in the metropolitan region of Recife, Pernambuco | Photography and Photo Editing: Lucas Sávio Freire da Silva Oliveira.

#### 4.1. More Images; Other Imaginaries

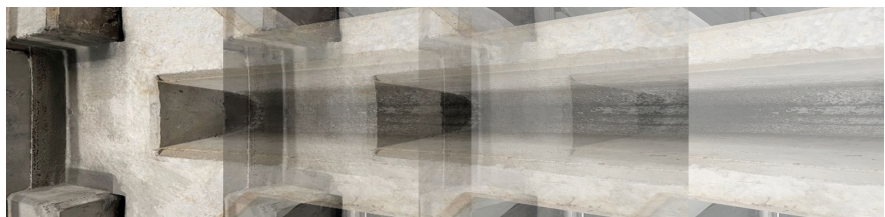
Reflecting on László and the brutality with which the raw cement was poured over him during his immigration journey, his stay in a new place and his experience as an Other unwanted by others brings on vomiting and dizziness. It brings suffocation and claustrophobia that only brutalism with its unfinished, cold and imposing aspect could bring. Architecture, walking with art, with thought, with intellectuality, digs spaces for a cruel Otherization (Alejandro, 2020) (that results in horrifying memories that cannot be forgotten, like those of the deadly Holocaust. But realizing that such memories are not just historical memories (the past) and can, at any moment, acquire the status of the heartbeat of now, bombarding us with internal and external insecurities, is *etiam plus* disturbing.

#### 4.2. What about the *Brutalisms* of Everyday Life?

It is interesting to make a few notes on the expressions “Az én romom, Az élettelen-

enségem”, which are simply “my ruin, my non-life” in Hungarian. The idea of bringing them into this specific language is simple: to establish a discursive and methodological link with the object of study chosen as a starting point, a resting place and a space of expansion for the arrival of the journey of ideas raised on themes that intertwine exclusion, otherness, violence, vulnerability and brutality. Themes that emerge from Corbet’s “The Brutalist” (Corbet, 2024), with the Hungarian Tóth on his overwhelming journey of forced immigration to the United States of America in a post-World War II scenario, in which he was a survivor of anti-Semitic concentration camps, but which affect so many others out there who are thrown into a world built on raw, cold concrete, which makes your knees grate and your bones crack, in the case of benches. In the world of the fictional Tóth, the main concern is not whether the exterior (from his perspective as an architect) will survive the ruin of the world, but whether its interior is still standing in the face of its perhaps already shattered architecture.

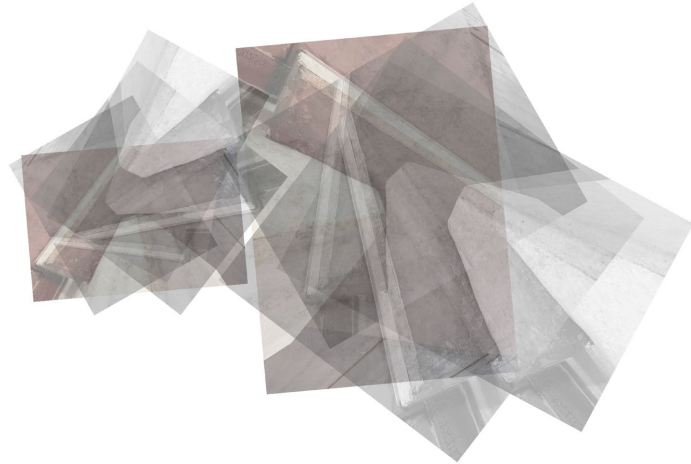
For the fictional Tóth, the canyon narrows even further. In one of the film’s countless, heartbreaking dialogues, the despised ex-architect, who, post-immigration, is thrown into a job as a construction assistant and imprisoned to live in a subhuman reality—dependent on donations of food to feed himself and on a shelter founded by fellow human beings to get a good night’s sleep—implicitly reveals the concept and experience of brutalism (in a sensory and architectural sense): as an architect who taught at universities, his reflections of the nebulous period of anti-Semitism and wars left him tormented by the fact that Hungarian buildings (his origin) were not or had not been prepared for the bombings or attacks resulting from such armadas. The aesthetics of this American place, presented in the film as needing stylistic, modern innovations, didn’t appeal to him—although he didn’t lack the talent to enjoy it. On the contrary, it intrigued him. His place of pain left no room for noises to remind him of the sensations experienced and forever marked during the war (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** Series I: Pernambuco Brutalism? (Photographs). Technique of superimposing photographs, was taken in the city of Recife, Pernambuco | Photography and Photo Editing: Lucas Sávio Freire da Silva Oliveira.

Tóth, Mbembe (2020) and the author of this essay walk through this canyon (Figure 7); they walk through this politics. What are these *poleis* that do not provide us with security or human dignity when it comes to living together in geographical spaces? (Figure 8). We are at the mercy of brutalism (unfinished, exposed, unhealthy buildings) that arises in a geographically malicious way, allied to social stratification, impoverishment and the dehumanization of bodies that

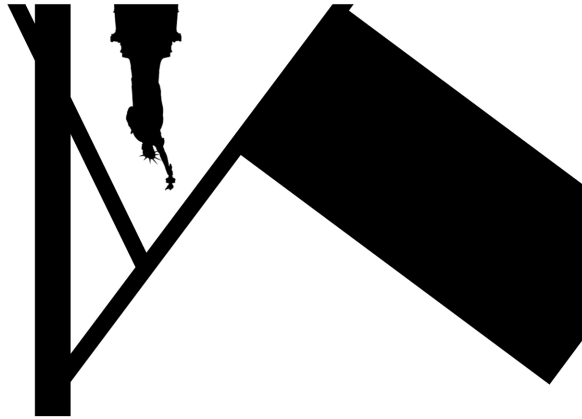
have historically not been validated by agents of power (Figure 9). And this is frightening. Because here, in this metropolis (Figure 10), and we believe that from one side of this territory to the other, aggressiveness, vulnerability, violence, insecurity, atrocity and hauntedness (Figure 11) are the meanings of brutalism that we have managed to erect together with all the Tóth's that have existed, exist and will exist in history (Figure 12).



**Figure 7.** Series II: Pernambuco Brutalism? (Photographs). Technique of superimposing photographs, was taken in the city of Recife, Pernambuco | Photography and Photo Editing: Lucas Sávio Freire da Silva Oliveira.



**Figure 8.** “Series I: Brutalism-Barbarism” or “I. Sorozat: Brutalizmus-Barbárság” (Photographs) | Technique of superimposing photographs, taken in the city of Camaragibe, metropolitan region of Recife, Pernambuco | Photography and Photo Editing: Lucas Sávio Freire da Silva Oliveira.



**Figure 9.** “Series I: Tóth’s Brutalism-Freedom” or “I. Sorozat: Tóth brutalizmusa-Szabadsága” (Digital composition) | Technique of superimposing images, created virtually and taken from the public domain online, in reference to the cover of the movie “The Brutalist” and one of its scenes. The vector of the Statue of Liberty (used in the composition) is under Creative Commons License | Creation: Lucas Sávio Freire da Silva Oliveira.



**Figure 10.** “Series II: Brutalism-Barbarity” or “II. Sorozat: Brutalizmus-Barbárság” (Photographs) | Technique of superimposing photographs, taken in the city of Camaragibe, metropolitan region of Recife, Pernambuco | Photography and Photo Editing: Lucas Sávio Freire da Silva Oliveira.



**Figure 11.** The brutalism diary (Photographs) | Technique of superimposing photographs, taken in the city of Camaragibe, in the metropolitan region of Recife, Pernambuco | Photography and Photo Editing: Lucas Sávio Freire da Silva Oliveira.



**Figure 12.** Brutal interval (Photograph) | Production context: Interval between the two parts of the film “The Brutalist”, which resulted in this visual essay. Credits: Brady Corbet, Universal Pictures/A24/Focus Features. Photography: Lucas Sávio Freire da Silva Oliveira | Photography and Photo Editing: Lucas Sávio Freire da Silva Oliveira.

“[...] would it be possible to **capture** the **urban condition**? What differentiates the **urban experience** from the experience of other **non-urban spatialities** or environments? More broadly, how do cities mediate our experience of the world around us and of the other? [...] In fact, the **evocation** of the urban as an aspect of **human experience**—that is, of **what is lived**, of **life with the other**—**already initiates this approach.**” (Netto, 2013: p. 23, translated by the author—emphasis added by the author)

### 5. Closing Thoughts: What Is, in Fact, *Brutocapitalism*?

After concluding the experience with this visual essay, some may raise the following question: okay, but at what point did the authors articulate brutalism with capital[-ism], in such a way as to neologize the term “*brutocapitalism*”? The simplicity of the answer, on our part, and perhaps the dissatisfaction that may be felt on your part, all lead to one place: understanding the sequence in which the ideas and visualities were presented and woven together, thread by thread, is not a practical task; after all, historical moments such as the Holocaust and the decadence of the real living life in and of cities are mobilized, implicitly and even timidly—a perhaps historical leap, probably characteristic of poetics.

It should be able to achieve this feat of allowing us to dive in, criticize, get the water out of our eyes and criticize again, enjoying every drop that runs down our faces. Sensitivity is the key. *Brutocapitalism*, author and readers, is about the challenge of watching an audiovisual production almost four hours long, shown in extremely select cinemas, 1) because of its subject matter, 2) because of its “cult” classification (which doesn’t appeal to the masses) and, precisely, 3) because of its long duration, which wouldn’t hold the audience. *Brutocapitalism*, dear readers,

is to watch as *béton brut* (raw cement) is cheapened in order to pour it into our hungry mouths and garnish our bodies that are already rusty from working to survive.

The perfect combination of not needing any finesse to erase the past, since cement is not criticized for its nature. They will throw it under our faces and make it penetrate our (in)consciousness, blurring and twisting memories that neither deserve nor should be erased. Capital has its limits, and we also find limits in the very explicit silhouettes of Brutalist architecture. But what's the point of bringing these themes together—and probably in such a strange and irreverent way? Perhaps if we go out into the streets and ask the brutalists we come across on a daily basis, we'll be able to break through the cement that surrounds us and de-rust our concrete-automated minds. Perhaps it's not so simple to get out of concrete. But it's also not so difficult to say no to being brutalized.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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