



# AN OVERWROUGHT ROMANCE



Fascist agitator turned to communism, restless soul and provocative dandy, writer **CURZIO MALAPARTE**'s fame is also linked to his spectacular house-temple in Capri, a "place of truth" related to Heidegger and Godard.

words by IAN KIAER



The building site of Casa Malaparte, Capri, 1940

A black-and-white photograph shows Casa Malaparte under construction, circa 1940. There is something about the grayness of the image, combined with our distant view from above, that makes the building appear almost like a model, its incompleteness suggesting that things are still contingent. It tends to be more common for buildings to be informed by models than to work like them, yet this house, in its gesture and thought, remains a model for its maker. The visible opening in the sloped staircase will later be covered over, while the roof's windbreak has yet to find its distinctive tapering form. In place of a predetermined design, the structure reveals an intuitive process of adjustment as a response to evolving ideas.

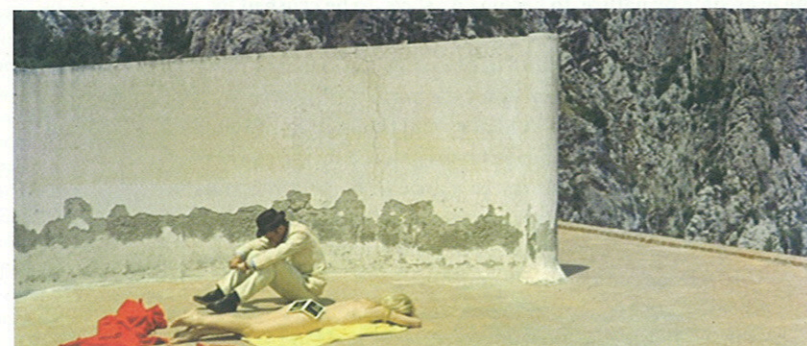
Although Curzio Malaparte had commissioned Adalberto Libera for initial drawings of the house, their collaboration didn't endure. Libera never acknowledged Malaparte's house in his inventory of works, while Malaparte neglected the architect in favor of a local contractor named Master Adolfo Amitrano, described by him as "short and extremely quiet, a man of few gestures and words, his dark eyes protected by slow cautious, wise lids." The drawings of Libera that survive might explain why the two men parted ways. They depict a two-story modernist villa that has little relation to its foundation or surroundings. By contrast, the structure in this photograph seems to cling to the rock, snugly nestling into its protective crust. It's an image that presents the building and earth as one, a self-conscious gesture of essential dwelling that brings the author close to a Heideggerian poetic.

Malaparte wrote of his house: "There was in Capri, in its wildest, most solitary and dramatic part, in that part completely oriented toward the south and east, where the human island becomes savage and nature expresses itself with incomparable cruel strength, a promontory of extraordinary pure lines, lunging at the sea with its rocky spur. No site in Italy has such a wide horizon, such depth of feeling. It is a place in truth, only fit for strong men, for free spirits. For it is easy to be overcome by nature, to become its slave, to be crushed by those delicate and violent jaws."<sup>2</sup>

"Cruel strength," "pure lines," "strong men"—the kind of phrasing that remains problematic, even after a contemporary ear makes allowances for the period; this, in turn, introduces the difficult and prismatic nature of Malaparte's history and thought. For though written in 1940, long after his exile by Mussolini, the language is still colored by the aesthetics of power, violence and the overwrought romance of his fascist youth. In his lifetime, the journalist/publisher/author/director went through a series of dramatic political transformations. Having been a fascist agitator in the 1920s, his turn to communism and ultimate deathbed conversion to Catholicism are well documented. He continued to be an object of ire for detractors of almost every persuasion and yet, for someone whose major literary form was the memoir, he eluded any labels through his continual contradictions and left turns.

#### INFO

**CURZIO MALAPARTE** (b. 1898, Prato, d. 1957, Rome), born Kurt Erich Suckert, was an Italian journalist, dramatist, novelist and diplomat. He is best known for his novels *Kaputt* and *La pelle* (The Skin). Malaparte fought in World War I and in 1922 took part in Benito Mussolini's March on Rome. As a member of the Partito Nazionale Fascista, he founded several periodicals and directed two metropolitan newspapers. In 1926, he founded with Massimo Bontempelli the literary quarterly *900*. In *Tecnica del Colpo di Stato* (1931) Malaparte attacked both Adolf Hitler and Mussolini. As a result, Malaparte was stripped of his National Fascist Party membership and sent into internal exile from 1933 to 1938 on the island of Lipari. Mussolini's regime arrested Malaparte again in 1938, 1939, 1941 and 1943 and imprisoned him in the Roman jail Regina Coeli. During that time, he built a house, known as Casa Malaparte, on Capo Massullo on the Isle of Capri. His remarkable knowledge of Europe and its leaders is based upon his experience in the Italian diplomatic service and as a correspondent. In 1941, he was sent to cover the Eastern Front as a correspondent for *Corriere della Sera*. From November 1943 to March 1946, he was an attaché to the American High Command in Italy as an Italian Liaison Officer. After the war, Malaparte's political sympathies veered to the left, and he became a member of the Italian Communist Party. In 1947, Malaparte settled in Paris and wrote dramas without much success. He died of cancer.

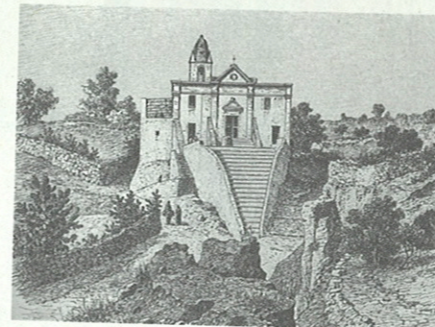


A picture of Malaparte taken while he was a war correspondent in Finland presents him boldly standing in the buff with what seems to be birch leaves for his only cover. His expression is stern, evoking the body beautiful set against nature, but in a way that undoes the high seriousness of a fascist aesthetic. There is enough absurdity, subtle exaggeration and self-consciousness in the event to make us uncertain as to how to read him. His was the way of the dandy, whose urbane method included a critique of Mussolini's poor taste in ties. He also penned "Une Femme Hitler" in *La Stampa*, meeting the violence he witnessed in 1930s Germany with the theory of a feminine Führer.

The initial "need" for Casa Malaparte came from the trauma of exile on Lipari, where Malaparte recorded the oppressive power of nature: "Too much sea, too much sky, for such a small island, and such a restless soul. The horizon is too broad, I drown in it. I am a photograph, a painting too small for such a big frame. The fault lies in the closeness of the island, the lack of a harmonious relationship between the immense space that surrounds the island and the small machinery of the human organism."<sup>3</sup>

His sense of himself as a diminutive photograph, suffering an overbearing frame, leads to an interpretation of the building as an agoraphobic impulse, at once an attempt to confront and turn away from nature. It may explain the numerous windows, repeatedly exposing and limiting an untameable sublime. A passage from Malaparte's novel *La Pelle* recounts a fictional visit from Rommel who asks the author if he had built the house; he responds, "pointing with a sweeping gesture to the sheer cliff of Matromania, the three gigantic rocks of the Faraglioni, the Sorrento peninsula, the islands of the Sirens, the distant blue of the Amalfi coastline, and the remote golden glimmer of the Paestum shores, I said: 'I designed the scenery.'"<sup>4</sup>

He not only positions himself as scenic director, he reveals how it is through the building that he controls his relation to the world. Theater is present in its form. The opening in the sloped staircase signals his initial thought of a vomitorium, which in turn makes the wedge of steps suggest a segment of an amphitheater. Hence, with every entry and exit, we are reminded of the potential for performance. In the final version of the house, this possibility has been bricked up to leave a uniform stairway, which changes the position of the stage. Rather than providing seating for an audience that looks back upon the cliff face, the steps now lead up to a platform facing the vast horizon.



Unknown, *Kirchelein Der Annunziata, Lipari, 1894*

#### FOOTNOTES

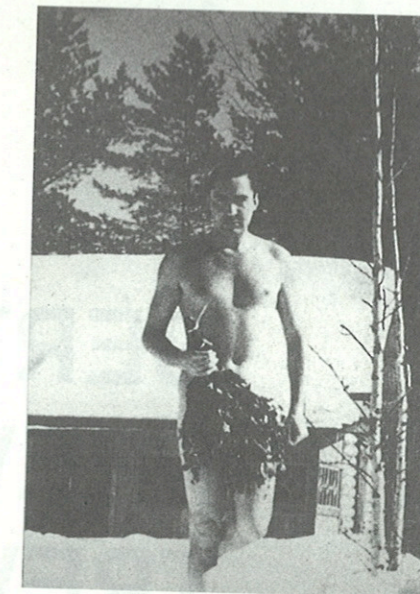
1. Marida Talamona, *Casa Malaparte* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), 85.
2. *Ibid.*, 84.
3. Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001), 41.
4. Phillip Lopate has commented, "Goddard responded on some, however unconscious, level to Malaparte's paradoxical vision of the residence as refuge, temple and prison. Bardot sunbathing on the roof is like a vestal virgin about to be sacrificed on the altar of a brutal god." Michael McDonough, et al, *Malaparte, A House Like Me* (New York: Clarkson & Potter Publishers, 1999), 169.

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3. *Ibid.*, 52.

4. Curzio Malaparte, *The Skin*, trans. David Moore (London: Alvin Redman Ltd, 1952), 220.



Curzio Malaparte in Finland when he was working as a reporter for the Axis powers

Yet it's perhaps appropriate to assign more sacred beginnings to the stairway, whose origin can be traced to a church of the *Annunziata* on Lipari. The narrowness at the base of the steps widens into a visual crescendo as one arrives at the portal and prepares to enter the church. Yet with Malaparte's building, Christian interiority is replaced by an opening onto a vista of "extraordinary pure lines," a "place of truth" reminiscent of an imaginary temple described by Heidegger: "Standing there, the building rests on rocky ground. This resting of the work draws up out of the rock the mystery of that rock's clumsy yet spontaneous support . . . The luster and gleam of the stone, though itself apparently glowing only by the grace of the sun, yet first brings to light the light of day, the breadth of sky, the darkness of the night. The temple's firm towering makes visible the invisible space of air."<sup>5</sup>

The house that is both temple and theater provides the severe stage necessary for the final third of Godard's *Le Mépris* (Contempt), in which Fritz Lang is directing a film of the *Odyssey*, while Brigitte Bardot plays out her character, Camille, as a ritualized sacrifice.<sup>6</sup> The contempt is for her screenwriter husband, as he offers up his integrity and their union before a brutish producer god. In the last sequence, we hear only Lang's command "Silence!" as the camera rolls and reaches into the distant blue expanse. Mindful of Camille's end, we might hear Malaparte whisper, "Too much sea, too much sky, for such a small island, and such a restless soul."