

Atlas Drugged

While in my teens I encountered the bold new world envisaged by Ayn Rand, a unique writer whose uncompromising philosophy is either praised or denounced by millions. No matter what, you can't shrug her off even as the financial world teeters on the edge of collapse. A recent BBC documentary clearly shows why Rand is still relevant.

*

"I will not die. It's the world that will end."

(Ayn Rand in her later years, quoted from a TV interview within a BBC documentary, [All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace](#), 2011)

When I was just thirteen, I watched a movie called **The Fountainhead**. At that time, the sexual connotations of the title and theme were lost on my gung-ho, boyish mind. What enthralled me were, simply, the uncompromising attitude and daring actions by the hero, Howard Roark, as played by Gary Cooper. Coming, as I did, from a literary diet that included characters like Biggles, Allan Quatermain, Beau Geste, Tarzan, John Carter and so on, I whooped with delight when Roark destroyed his own architectural works that had been sullied – prostituted even – by lesser minds. I probably resolved, then and there, that nobody's gonna muck around with *my* sand castles next time at the beach, either.

Not too long after I saw that film, I went to my local library and got the book written by a woman with the curious name of Ayn Rand. After reading, my mind expanded somewhat more. Today, being a longtime aficionado of classic Hollywood film, I would still enjoy watching that movie for many reasons other than the story.

Years passed – perhaps I was eighteen – until there came a day when I noticed my oldest brother (at twenty-six) toss aside an impossibly thick volume, accompanied by a few expletives. Curious, I picked it up to see the name of Ayn Rand once again. The title piqued my curiosity even more: *Atlas Shrugged*, with the cover showing a graphic picture of the mythical god, bowed down, but his arms up holding the earth on his back. I read it, cover to cover, quite the longest piece of fiction I'd read (I think it still is).

It's not an easy read for a teenager, ignorant or not. It's perhaps the same for some adults who are not prepared for a dramatic romance used as a screen to expound upon a socio-economic philosophy. Much later in life, I discovered that Karl Marx at least had the decency to keep his philosophy within the bounds of non-fiction; you'd expect *Capital*, for example, to be tough going to read and digest (it is). Ayn Rand, to give her due, was clever enough to realize this: if you truly want to hold your audience emotionally, then write the thesis so that the reader can *easily* identify with the heroes while you drip-feed the philosophical underpinnings.

A word of advice, though: first read *The Fountainhead*, it being a more exciting story and better written than *Atlas Shrugged*. The former paves the way for the mind-boggling detail within the latter and illustrates why it's better to read a thesis that reads like a story – *The Fountainhead* – than a story that reads like a thesis – *Atlas Shrugged*.

But, at eighteen, one knows very little about how the world works, being more concerned with oneself. So, for me, the latter book was mostly turgid, repetitive prose that detracted from the superficial story. Dimly, though, I knew Rand was trying to sell me something about individuality, oppressive government, the evil of collectivism (what ever that was), free-market capitalism and so forth.

Still, I persevered, even though I caught myself dropping off to sleep sometimes. Hence, by the time I got to the last line on page one thousand-and-something, I was glad I'd finished. At the same time, I was immensely disappointed: the crass action of the fictional John Galt making the Sign of The Dollar in the air with his outstretched fingers was, I thought, just a pathetic parody of well-known religious symbolism.

That's it? I thought: Rand's just pushing a religion of her own? Like my brother, I tossed the book aside with a few choice words and got on with the reality of life. Being in a Catholic family at that time, it was an understandable reaction.

Twenty years later – the mid-eighties probably – and now *sans* any religion, I came upon another Rand volume: *The Virtue of Selfishness*, and impulsively bought it. I read about half, but again became bored with the repetitive and tiresome nature of the text; and shelved it. It's still in my collection, unfinished – a curiosity. For the next twenty years or so, the name Ayn Rand became for me just another reference point anchored within the enervating debate about laissez-faire capitalism.

Today, of course, the world is reaping the benefits *and* destructiveness of unfettered individuality and capitalist enterprise. The sweet life is now not so sweet for most. Civil unrest permeates most of the world. A tiny few around the world control most of the planet's resources and wealth. Uncertainty spreads like cancer through the lands and markets. Fear (of job loss, house foreclosure, disappearing wealth, poor health, lack of education etc) is not just another four-letter word. The Occupy Wall Street movement has now gone global – and is now gone. And all during all this financial turmoil, that pesky name kept cropping up....

And only recently in a place that surprised me: Ayn Rand herself appeared in the documentary referenced in the quote at the top. In that, the BBC production team constructed a cogent argument illustrating two key underpinnings of the 2008 financial crash: first, the influence of Ayn Rand's economic philosophy upon **Alan Greenspan** (who was, according to the doco, a long-time friend of Rand's); and second, the inordinate and unfounded reliance upon computer software used in global financial trading and speculation.

I looked at and listened carefully to Rand's 1959 interview with Mike Wallace. Her intensity and forcefulness were evident. Her eyes never stopped moving, though she seemed quite relaxed and confident. Her voice was firm, her Russian accent still noticeable, even after thirty years in USA. She dominated the excerpts from that

interview, and projected a self-assured aura that perhaps only few of us manage, under the glare of public TV.

She explained the core of her philosophy: humanity is distinguished by *ideas*, the *fundamentals* of which establish the *values* (or virtues) of man with which to formulate categorical *principles*. Among the last, Rand asserted that “the highest moral purpose is the achievement of [man’s] own happiness” and that “each man must follow his own rational self-interest.” She made it clear that her philosophical mentors were Aristotle and, to some extent, Thomas Aquinas. She also stated that no other philosophers influenced her thinking.

After reflecting upon the BBC production, my own readings of her works and of others, and researching sites such as [About Ayn Rand](#), [The Christian Science Monitor](#) and [The Ayn Rand Institute](#), it’s abundantly clear her philosophical stance was and is quite extreme.

Not all ideas are bad, thankfully, but some ideas *are* dangerous; so also extremism in any guise. Hence, any extreme idea can be a recipe for potential catastrophe as the BBC narrator intoned. We must not forget, for example, what Adolf Hitler’s “rational self-interest” led to, nor that of Pol Pot’s and many similar ideas in history. I’m *not* suggesting that Ayn Rand was of that ilk; but there is little doubt that anybody risks losing sight of reality by strictly adhering to a philosophy which uses The Self as the supreme artifact and arbitrator in all matters.

Howard Roark’s ‘self destruction’ of his works, for example, can be compared to the child who won’t share his toys and would rather smash than share them; and damn the consequences. John Galt’s retreat into his own ‘superior’ world is like the teenager who refuses to allow parents into his bedroom and inner sanctum. I’m sure many of us share those thoughts as we mature, but it’s the sort of reality most people grow up to avoid, simply because the world, our world is a collective whole: that’s the reality when her books were published and even more so today.

Indeed, Rand perhaps vaguely recognized – or simply accepted – that homogenous reality when her lover, Nathaniel Branden, established a small group of Rand admirers called, ironically, The Collective, a term much despised and vilified in the two fiction novels quoted here. A term of derision for Rand’s sycophantic fans? An intentional, inside joke? A philosophical slip?

Whatever the case, getting high on *yourself* for most of your life can lead to a number of abnormalities, from mild narcissism to the vacuity of solipsistic singularity as perhaps exemplified by Rand’s claim in the quote at the top – even *if* she spoke in a metaphorical sense. You can’t be quite sure when you see and hear her speaking, though.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, I recognize the intellectual and writerly achievements of Rand: according to one source I found, *Atlas Shrugged* is the second most bought book in the USA, after the bible. That’s quite an accomplishment, no question. (As a writer, I should be so lucky!) On the other hand, accumulated sales are not generally the best indicator of essential worth of a book, a visual art work, a song and so on. For example, that heinous book, *Mien Kampf*, is still sold globally and still attracts a large

readership. But, whatever the facts of true readership, there's no denying Rand's books have indeed had a profound effect upon millions. To capitalize on that effect and popularity, **a movie** was released this year (2011), something that I doubted could ever happen, given the difficulties of adaptation for the screen. Being a movie critic, I will see it eventually.

Nevertheless, it remains for history to reveal whether the long term global effect of the Rand phenomenon will be ultimately good or bad.

If the history of extremism is any guide, I tend to think the latter. If you disagree (and even if you don't), I'd suggest your spending three hours to discover for yourself just how we are *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace*.

Copyright © 2011, Roger J. Burke, www.rogerjburke.com. All rights reserved.